

RKB
Shyamal

Newsletter for Birdwatchers

VOL XIII NO. 1 JANUARY 1973.



NEWSLETTER - FOR

BIRDWATCHERS

Volume 13, Number 1

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FROM A TRAIN WINDOW

J. L. Singh

It is early October. I am comfortably seated next to a window on the Frontier Mail at New Delhi. Apart from getting to my destination, Kota, I have little else to do except gaze out of the train window.

It's 9.45. The Guard whistles and waves his flag; the engine moves forward; we are leaving Delhi behind along with hosts of Bank Mynas that are in evidence all over the platform. Railway platforms are a favourite haunt of Bank Mynas. It won't be much of a misnomer changing their name to platform mynas.

On an earlier journey from Calcutta I had noticed a large number of Pied Myna nests in the various struts and structures that support the electric overhead wires. It seems that mynas as a family are immune to the noise and smoke of trains as they hurtle past.

The train is now going over the Tilak Bridge. It is still moving quite slowly. Soon we cross an area where a large quantity of Delhi trash is dumped. Whitebacked Vultures and Pharaoh's Chicken abound. I see an occasional Longbilled Vulture as well. House Crows and Pariah Kites complete the scene.

The train moves on. Soon we are speeding towards Mathura. A thin mist is still present but the sun is drying it up fast. Through it we see large stretches of water filled with bird-life. What beautiful country! Soon all track of birds seen

is lost. Similar country continues beyond Mathura right up to Gangapur.

Telegraph wires follow the train through the entire journey. Perched on them I see Ring Doves, Little Brown Doves and Red Turtle Doves. Roseringed Parakeets and pigeons abound. Every stretch of water brings forth a fresh horde of Cattle and Little egrets. I see Painted Storks, White Ibis and Blacknecked Stork. As the train zips past I see a Pied Kingfisher dive into the water. A little later I see a Whitebreasted Kingfisher sitting on the wires holding a fish about two inches long across in its bill.

And so it continues. Just outside Mathura I notice 10 to 12 Green Bee-eaters sitting so close to each other that it is difficult to tell them apart. On slightly raised ground in the middle of an inundated field I notice Sarus Crane standing over its nest. There is one large egg between its legs. Its mate stands about 10 metres away.

On this trip I don't see any Adjutant Storks. A rail journey through Assam is different. There I have seen Adjutants and Lesser Adjutants every half kilometer or so. The bird is normally solitary, standing on one leg. Only on one occasion did I see a Lesser Adjutant moving; it had just caught a snake in its bill.

Telegraph wires are the best place to look for birds. I see robins, both *Maximilian's* and Indian. I also see drongos and rollers. The last two are particularly common in Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. On a previous train journey through Bihar I had found that seven out of every ten birds you see on telegraph wires are either drongos or rollers. They are not so dominating in the rest of the country though.

I see an occasional Blackwinged Kite sitting on a telegraph pole. A Brahminy Kite is also seen a little distance away; its reddish brown upper plumage glistening in the sun.

Being in a position to do so I go and sit in the engine at Bharatpur. This gives a much better view of the countryside.

The train starts. I notice a Common Myna flying along with the train. Noting the speed on the speedometer of the engine I find that it is flying at 40 km p.h.

The train picks up speed. Rock Pigeons and doves are sitting on the track in large numbers. I hold my breath; they fly away just in time. The train moves even faster. Finally it happens that one pigeon dashes against the engine and I see a flurry of feathers flying past the engine cab. The driver tells me that on an average one bird is killed every hour at speeds exceeding 80 km p.h.

My mind is soon diverted. I see River Terns and Swallows as the train crosses a bridge. As the train has slowed down slightly I am able to differentiate between Wiretailed, Striated and Indian Swallows.

Soon we pass a stretch of brackish stagnant water. I am re-

warded with a good view of a Purple Heron and an equally good one of a Grey Heron. Pond Herons are seen a dime a dozen.

On the entire run I see only one Black Ibis. On similar runs through Saurashtra I have seen so many Black Ibis that I stop looking twice at one. A rail journey through that part of the country is very rewarding. Being metre gauge the trains are slower and you get a better view. I have seen flamingos near Dwarka; gulls, both brown- and black-headed around Sika; common and wood sandpipers, stilts, grey and white wagtails, red-shanks, grey partridge, grey shrike and a host of other birds on train journeys through Saurashtra. In winter you can see great swarms of Rosy Pastors and elegant flights of Demoiselle Cranes.

We cross Gangapur where there is a small halt. I notice a tree on the platform where a large number of Cattle Egrets are nesting.

I have not mentioned Redwattled Lapwings but they are very common. I see an occasional Little Cormorant. The latter are very common in train journeys through southern Bengal. It is given good company there by Bronzewinged- and Pheasant-tailed Jacanas, Whistling Teals, Dabchicks, Purple Moorhens, White-breasted Waterhens, etc.

The train enters Kota. The end of a good journey.

ON SEEING THE FIRST (COLOURFUL) WAGTAIL IN SPRING

D. A. Stairmand

I was out in the fields at Erangal, Marve (Bombay) on 20.ii (1971) and had already had a marvellous day's birding, watching the brilliant blues of Whitebreasted Kingfishers and rollers in flight, a pair of Golden Orioles in leafy trees and at least one perfect male Small Minivet. A feature of the day had been male Magpie Robins testing out their song on exposed positions on tree-tops and displaying to their ladies. The male Indian Robins were putting their few notes together and there had been a charming duet from a pair of coucals in the line of trees near me. The sky was cloudless, the air cool and the light perfect for viewing. The Red Silk Cottons and Corals were in flower to my delight as well as the birds. In other words the 'atmosphere was 'Spring'. A good background to all this was provided by a very obliging male Desert Wheatear on my favourite hillock (soon to support a large hotel) hopping, mounting stones and catching insects moving ever nearer to me by oblique moves for twenty minutes, Hoopoes digging their strong bills into the iron hard sun-baked ground of fields of paddy stubble, and a most interesting and prolonged battle between two Redshanks on the sea shore which ended with the victor having an exultant dip in the sea and then wagging its tail up and down with unabashed and rather

vulgar joy. There had been, of course, many other interesting incidents and beautiful birds to watch.

Towards sunset I was around Erangal Village tank and almost casually followed with my binoculars 'just another wagtail' in flight. I'm afraid that in India it is all too easy to become blasé about birds - there are so many beautiful ones to attract and distract a birdwatcher in a day's birding that one can quite conceivably think 'just another wagtail' towards the day's close. However, the wagtail that I had picked up in flight was not in its winter dress as the other wagtails had been but was a Blackheaded Yellow Wagtail in brilliant summer dress. The black head and yellowish green upper plumage were a perfect foil for the bright yellow below. This beautiful bird flew low over and tripped around on the water lilies on the tank and was always uttering its lively call note weesp. The wagtail was a perfectly glorious sight and being my first sighting of the year of a wagtail in this plumage I must admit it even outshone all the other glorious birds I had seen that day.

INFORMATION WANTED

Mme Shanta Neville

It is today (23.iii.1972) only that I hear of your existence, after some six years at Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry. There are quite some points concerning Indian birds that puzzle me and I would be very happy to have them solved.

Jungle Babblers. Sheer accident placed a helpless, naked baby-babbler into my hands in summer 1970 - it thrived, and two months later another one and as chance would have it, a little later another one of the same species. I found them rather undemanding, easy to rear, and by far the most amusing little pets I have ever had. You just sit back and watch: their exuberant good humour is catching. One of their favourite games is roly-poly pushing each other over; lying on the back while the two others go hop hop buck-jumping, running, skipping, jumping; or better still, if they find some light cloth loosely lying about, one or two, sometimes all the three will get underneath, or the one that stays outside will try to 'tuck them up' and busily pull and push the cloth about, delighting very specially in jumping about on top of the wrapped-up ones. All this is keeping them in real fits of laughter. They will mock-fight and puff head-feathers, or try and catch the other unawares and tweek his tail. They seem to have the enviable attitude, that all life is an endless amusement in good company - they are unhappy only when separated. They certainly are the

most delightful guests I ever entertained and I hope they will stay on indefinitely. They are entirely free and roam about in all the neighbouring gardens within about one square kilometer. They are fed on ground-up parched gram with oil + water, they will accept most fruit with an inclination to favour grapes; they will drink milk and take some rice and scraps of meat. They are with me for $1\frac{1}{2}$ years but show no signs of nesting intentions. I can't make out their sex, but would think it rather an odd chance if they were all the same.

Last autumn, when all the three babblers were fully grown, I happened to be given another very young baby babbler. The three stood around the small cardboard box, giving voice to their puzzled surprise, but very soon, first the youngest of the three, and then the others, started feeding the baby in a joint effort; so that most of the time poor baby had two beaks stuffing him simultaneously and the third pushing the others impatiently to the side. I only added some milk occasionally, which baby did not like at all. But because or in spite of all enthusiastic joint feeding efforts: baby grew very happily - and for two months after the baby had been eaten by a hawk still the three babblers would hop about with their beaks brimming over with food and call the baby.

Question. When do babblers - or most birds here - moult? How can you tell the sex when there is no colour difference? Do birds need special food in the moulting? Why does a lost tail regrown within six weeks and why do lost wing-feathers not get replaced? Does a pulled-out feather get replaced rather than a broken (or cut) one? What can be done to encourage feather-growth?

Crimsonbreasted Barbets. Last year the crows had dropped a young barbet into my garden and I kept and reared him for some three or four weeks until he seemed strong enough to fend for himself. I set him free, far out of town, between lots of banyan and peepal trees. But this fellow had decided from the start, that he was not going to have any friendly relations with humans - nor with babblers either for that matter, and he would readily snap at me or slowly walk up to a babbler and then suddenly dart at his face. Well, he gave his species a bad reputation. But this reputation had to be thoroughly revised:

On March 2nd (three weeks ago) I was given three naked bird babies, which were spontaneously called the three Graces, in the hope (against hope seeing how amazingly ugly these little crumpled bags-of-soft-skin-with-beaks were) in the hope that they would one day do full honour to this name. Only the formation of their feet and beak sort-of indicated that they might eventually turn out to be Barbets. I judged their age approximately to be 2, 4 and 6 days respectively, but there I might be wrong, as I know nothing about the size of the Coppersmith's

egg and the babies were quite big in comparison with the fully grown bird. Well, now they are fully dressed and as beautiful as any young barbet; and they have tried their wings for the first time today. One flew upwards onto a branch 30 cm higher than the starting point and about 1 metre far.

They were fed on: milk, EHA food (?), peepal figs, cockroaches, bananas, grapes, lantana, mulberry, etc., etc. This diet does not seem to have been far from right, as their feathers are thick and glossy and their all-round health seems fine.

Rearing these three babies made the whole family love them. They are very sweet, love to be cuddled in the human hand, they make the most endearing twirling, gurgling and bubbling noises, apart from the high-pitched first attempts of their regular utterings. The barbet-babies are charming - it will be fascinating to see their development during the adolescence.

Question. When do barbets get their crimson breast and head decorations? How long does it take for the egg to hatch and from the hatching to the first flight and the leaving of the nest? Do the barbets stay with their young for some time after, or do they use the nest as a family dormitory; what do these birds feed their babies on? I would like to have all possible information on barbet-life.

Whitethroated Munia. I was given two babies, one half-dead and the other hardly alive. Well, one died within the first hour and the other thrived: on milk, EHA-food and an occasional house-fly and became the most adorable tame munia. It would come when called 'Timmy' and head straight for the face. Perch on the nose, or ear or on the rim of the sun-glasses or any other, even the smallest, promontory that offered itself. It would turn upside down in the excitement to get its food. Reared in the same nest with a baby sparrow somewhat younger than the munia, it took to flying very much earlier than its 'milk-brother', but stayed strictly within the covered premises. Only when the sparrow started flying about and out into the trees, only then would the munia fly out with him and venture into the open-sky. From then on, when they both came in, we would put them (rat-proof) into the big-Munia-aviary for the night and let them go out again as soon as they would call to be let out. Timmy, even sitting in the big Siris tree of the neighbour's would come when we called, but he became less and less eager to be let out of the aviary until he did not want to fly out at all any more and now seems to have forgotten his name as well, and the sparrow prefers to sleep, somewhere else.

Question. Is Kambu and Millet and water considered a sufficient diet even for nesting munias? Why do they nibble the Eranthemum leaves so eagerly - is it for the joy of nibbling, or do they get some necessary nutriment from this plant? They also go on nibbling at a fresh bamboo twig, until not one leaf is left hanging on. Why? Do munias, like chickens, need sand as grinding-stones in their stomach? Can one add (and what) to

their diet when they are feeding the young? Apart from old baya nests, what other nesting material should they preferably be given? Will they take to a nesting-box?

I shall gladly answer any question you might like to ask, and I would be very happy to get some information from you.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

During 1972 the number of our subscribers has not increased. We would like to hope that this is not a reflection of the lack of interest in birdwatching in the country. In fact this interest appears to be spreading. Several Tourist Agencies are organising themselves to handle group tours of ornithologists who are interested in visiting our National Parks and Sanctuaries, and some of this enthusiasm of the foreign visitor is bound to contaminate his Indian hosts.

Peter Jackson's article 'A daysworth of Delhi birds' subsequently printed as a brochure by World Wildlife Fund India has been in great demand. Will those of our readers who consider themselves knowledgeable enough try and produce similar check-lists for their own areas, prefaced by an account of the habitat and the routes they have pursued in arriving at their totals. It is not necessary to restrict the exercise to 24 hours as Jackson did. A week or even a month, or indeed a full season, can be covered, and the list and the notes for particular areas would be very valuable.

Apart from the pleasure which birds will continue to give us, they are being considered important indicators of the state of our environment. The National Committee on Environmental Planning and Coordination of the Government of India has been studying the possibilities of analysing tissues removed from different species of birds in various areas of the country with a view to determine the extent of DDT and other chemicals proliferating in the environment. If this scheme gets going, it will give an added importance to our avian population.

CORRESPONDENCE

' An interesting episode '

This refers to the note by Lalsinh M. Raol in Vol. 12(12): 11.

Sex jealousy is not an attitude seldom met with in birds, and dislodging attempts of the other vulture we can safely ascribe to this. This kill-joy's sex, if known, will be of

added interest to the readers - a male bird, perhaps.

What motivated the common House Crow to do the same is however a difficult question to answer. Of course, at inter specific level sex jealousy is rare indeed. But in the case of crows, the possibility cannot be ruled out, for, not very rarely, they are known to have obtruded and spoiled the pleasures of birds not belonging to their own tribe.

T. V. Jose
Bombay

Migrant birds

For sometime now, I have been wondering about the possibility of asking members of the Field Club to collect data on the dates of arrival and departure of some of the birds which migrate to and from this country. Over a period of years this data should add significantly to what is already known about bird migration here.

A few days back I consulted Dr B. Biswas about this plan. As he had no objection to the idea I am writing this letter to you. Contrary to his suggestion, however, that I send this letter in July-August next year (so that it would be fresh in readers' minds when the birds start migrating) I am sending the letter now.

I suggest that the Newsletter publish a list of common birds on which information is to be collected. The number should not be too ambitious as it would be better to collect a reasonable amount of data for a few species than to have scanty information on many. I would also suggest that the birds chosen have distinctive coloration, not easily confusable with nearly related species. This is so that the average reader does not send incorrect information because of mistaken identity.

The list together with a request for information required could be printed twice a year - once in the monsoon just before the migrants start arriving and again in January before they start leaving. It will be necessary to do this every year as otherwise readers are likely to forget to send in their observations.

At the end of each season it might be worthwhile to publish a list of all information collected. Otherwise if the number of letters don't justify a biannual report, they may be compiled and plotted on a map at the end of three to five years.

Debashis Ray
Calcutta

An episode with a hawk

It happened over some 35 years back. I was a student and game was plentiful and cartridges were cheap. I used to run to a small

patch of water with my gun every other morning in winter. It was end of December and bitterly cold. The sun was still three-quarters of an hour ahead and I had knocked a pair of lovely Redcrested Pochard and was waiting for the sun to come out to retrieve them. On a babul tree (Acacia arabica) which was well inside water, sat a hawk. This lone bird I had seen many a time before on the tree. To me it appeared a sparrow-hawk, but I cannot be certain as there was no Salim Ali's book then and I was not so knowledgeable at the time.

I was day-dreaming and watching the sunrise when suddenly I saw the hawk dive and pick up the male Redcrest, and flying with it settle on the tree and start eating it. Now a male Redcrested Pochard is almost 2 kg in weight and one can imagine the strength of a hawk, the size of a pigeon. I shouted and yelled but it was no use. It just sat on the tree and ate the bird.

Lt. Col. A. David
Officers' Qr A/1, Old Police
Lines, Morigate Road,
Delhi

MINUTES OF THE XIIITH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE BIRDWATCHERS' FIELD CLUB OF INDIA

The XIIith Annual General Meeting of the Birdwatchers' Field Club of India was held on Saturday, the 23rd December 1972, at the residence of the Honorary Secretary, Mr Zafar Futehally, at 32A, Barfiwala Marg, Andheri, Bombay 58, at 4.30 p.m.

Dr Salim Ali was elected the Chairman of the meeting.

The minutes of the XIth Annual General Meeting held on 19th December 1972 were read and approved.

Giving an account of the membership and financial position of the Club the Honorary Secretary said that the Newsletter was being sent out to about 275 persons. Of these only 94 had paid their dues for 1972. As a result there was a deficit in operations to the extent of Rs1572/- for the year which had been absorbed by the Dynacraft Machine Co. Pvt. Ltd. It was noted that if every one paid up their dues the Newsletter would be a viable undertaking.

The Honorary Secretary reported that there was a balance of Rs821.55 in the Savings Bank account.

Mr J. S. Serrao was requested to pursue errant subscribers in future.

It was noted that the Club received the Audubon journal and the Colorado Field Ornithologist in exchange for the Newsletter, and these were available on loan to members.

With regard to articles for the Newsletter it was noted that there were 45 contributors during 1972 as against 39 in 1971.

Several suggestions received from

Shri Lalsinh M. Raol
Shri K. K. Surendran
Shri Robert Grubh
Dr A. S. Mahajan
Dr R. Vasa

regarding improving the Newsletter and making it more useful from the point of view of the amateur birdwatcher, the Honorary Secretary said that he would take all of them into account.

With regard to the problem of increasing the circulation of the Newsletter Dr A. S. Mahajan of the Indian Institute of Technology of Powai, suggested that we should advertise in the newspapers and also keep sample copies of the Newsletter in the IIT Hostel and other public institutions. The suggestion was accepted.

Mr V. G. Govekar offered to secure the names and addresses of persons taking bird books for reading from the British Council Library, in order that they be approached to become members of the Birdwatchers' Field Club.

Mr V. G. Govekar also offered to investigate possibilities of securing facilities given by the Postal Department for postage of periodicals at concessional rates and report to the Honorary Secretary.

Dr Vasa suggested that we sponsor a competition for the best bird photograph of the year and that a prize of Rs25/- be given annually. He also suggested that a prize of Rs25/- be also given for the best article received during the year. These proposals were accepted.

The following persons were nominated to the Editorial Board:

Dr Salim Ali
Mrs Jamal Ara
Dr Biswamoy Biswas
K. S. Lavkumar
Prof. K. K. Neelakantan
Mr Robert Grubh
Dr R. L. Fleming, Jr
Dr A. S. Mahajan
Br A. Navarro
Mr Zafar Futehally - Editor

The meeting terminated with a vote of thanks to the Chair.

Zafar Futehally
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BIRDPWATCHERS

Volume 13, Number 2

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NOTES FROM SAURASHTRA

K. S. Lavkumar

Of late I have noticed that Gujarat is featuring quite often in the Newsletter and it is heartening to note that all those who have something to say, have nice things to say about our State. Well, I may say another very nice thing about our part of the country. If I am not mistaken, we shall soon be the first state to have a checklist of birds. This is being brought out by the Department of Information and Tourism of Gujarat and it will form a part of the 1973 Tourist Diary. The diary will contain thirteen paintings of some of our common and colourful birds. These will also be separately printed in sets of greeting cards. Unfortunately the diary has been delayed in the press on account of a strike last month by Government employees. Also, very soon to be out is a rather ambitious publication on the birds of Nal Sarovar which I think is the first of its type for a particular sanctuary. I am happy to have been actively associated with both these projects and I hope the other States would encourage their local birdwatchers as Gujarat has its.

Lalsinh Raol writes and tells me that he has seen his first Crab Plover on the tidal mud at Rozi Pier, Jamnagar. I had seen this bird for the first time also there and at about the same time! If anyone wishes to see Oystercatchers,

then I would suggest his going to the same place. The Jamnagar coast is a fascinating stretch of bird haunt. It might be a worthwhile endeavour to have some conducted birdwatching done along this coast in winter, the mangrove-covered tidal flats and labyrinthian channels between them are most fascinating.

Mt Girnar with its well-wooded valleys is another wonderful place to visit particularly after the rains, Girnar itself being a sort of base for the Longbilled Vultures of the area. It is a thrilling sight to see these great birds soaring around the sheer rock pinacles and gliding along the weathered cliff-faces. The valley forests are abounding in birds, the commonest being Tickel's Blue Flycatcher.

Talking of vultures reminds me of seeing some time back a vulture feeding among others on a dog's carcass by the roadside while on the way to Jasdan. The bird wore a bold numbered arm-band. This bird is one of the thirty so tagged in the Gir Forest last year. Robert Grub of the Bombay Natural History Society informs me that it is a Whitebacked Vulture. I suppose I should have at the time identified the species, but I was so taken by surprise that I quite forgot to note the species and only remembered the number! A week back, again on my way to Jasdan and a couple of kilometres from the place I saw a fine specimen of Black Vulture picking up a small, twiggy branch from the ground and then flying off with it to some large trees nearby where its mate sat close to an already bulky stick platform. The drought promises a very successful season for the vultures. But, we shall see much havoc to all the other populations of birds and animals. This year the famous Nal Sarovar is a myth. Most of the reservoirs are drying up rapidly if not already depleted. There is frighteningly nightmarish period ahead for all concerned. For a time though, Rajkot appears to be living in a fool's paradise with full flow of water since the Aji Lake was lucky enough to receive two rather sharp showers at the onset of the monsoon rains. Our gutters are all brimming and we have White and Yellow wagtails tripping around and in the open cesspools one can see Little Ringed Plovers, Redwattled Lapwings, Yellow-wattled Lapwings, stints, sandpipers and occasionally a few Ruffs and Reeves and rarely a Blacktailed Godwit. Blackwinged Stilts are always present in pairs and small parties. Though it may reflect rather poorly on our civic authorities, I am sure a round of our open gutters and their overflow catchments would bring much admiration from the next European tourist interested in birds who may happen my way.

Going to leave my daughter to school in the mornings makes it possible for me to see Pied, Desert and Isabelle-line wheatears. They live in the most open stretches and one can hardly imagine any insect life to subsist or let alone be as active and jaunty as they invariably are. On the school building it is not unusual to see a Blue Rock Thrush bobbing its fore-

part and flicking its tail and wings. Then of course there are quite a few Tawny Pipits running about and small parties of Ashycrowned Finch-Larks and pairs of Rufoustailed Finch-Larks.

It speaks volumes for the predatory instincts of Man that wild animals and particularly birds distrust us when they will happily feed a few inches away from the eyes of a grazing horse or cow. I have often longed to be able to turn myself into any sort of animal at will as did the ogre of Puss in the Boots fame; what immense possibilities would then open up in the field of birdwatching! The pleasure of handling birds while mist-netting is difficult to describe; every texture of the feathers, the smallest details can then be examined and one can feel the very vitality of a lovely bird often so small and delicate that one wonders it is capable of such vibrant living. It is at such moments that I have understood the true nature of a child wanting to kill a bird to handle and the urge of men who kill for sport and at the same time I have felt the futility of such actions and the pleasure of being a human being who above all can enjoy the loveliness of creation around him. Conservation is the correct sublimation of the innate instinct of the hunter in each member of our species. I have seen a lioness kill in broad daylight and at the moment of her triumph it was quite apparent the bodily ecstasy she was experiencing, holding the warm prey in her powerful grip. Being a human being and that too one who has been strongly influenced by the gentle yet forceful concepts of the Budha, I have been thrilled when wild creatures have come within arm's distance from me. The feeling which Adam must have experienced in his Eden. I vividly remember all such encounters and will try to resurrect a few of them.

On 16th January 1973 I was pruning a pomegranate in my backyard when from a thick foliated tree nearby a Lesser White-throat flew out and alighted on one of the branches of the tree I was working on. It sat there for a moment poised so close I could have touched it and I could see all the lovely details of its soft toned greys and browns and the distinct white throat. I was a good deal chagrined when it suddenly realised its error in misplaced trust and hastily withdrew.

Near the same tree, a few days earlier I came face to face with a female Blue Rock Thrush. She had alighted on the compound wall and both of us paused to look each other up. It was quite obvious she had arrived straight from the Buddhist Ladakh where men are infact not feared by birds and possibly she had not been subjected to any traumatic experiences enroute. I could clearly see the fine barring on her breast, the bristles at the base of her bill, and the scales on her legs. She bowed and flicked her wings a couple of times and then with another flick flew onto another perch again close by uttering her subdued tuc-tuc. After examining me for a moment she flew off around the house.

Black Redstarts are always a pleasure to meet. I have often sat motionless and had one of them slowly work up to me almost to the feet. Even the subdued toned females are lovely birds and when so close, the little ring round the feminine eye can be clearly seen. The cocks are terribly attractive.

A fortnight back I had dropped in on an old colleague of mine for a cup of morning tea. He has a rather overgrown garden of which he is very proud and spends most of his mornings pottering around spraying water. Though not a garden which would fetch any tropics, it certainly is haunted by a number of birds. Outside his window is a tangle of jasmine and a red-flowered shrub. Both these attracted White-eyes and Purple Sunbirds. I could watch these birds at whisperable distance from behind the curtains. At this range White-eyes are truly colourful birds. I made out each feather or the white eye ring! The glisten of nectar on the sunbird's bills could also be seen and the soft flutter of their wings and the throaty chuckles uttered to one another were audible. I had become a part of their intense and vitality packed existence.

I can go on and on about such intimate encounters, the Whitecapped Redstarts with a nest-load of young just a foot above my head where I stood during devotional singing at Badrinath, the nest brimming with young Tickel's Willow Warblers in a thorny bush being fed by the fussy little parents as I sat close by munching my lunch on a trek in trans-Himalayan country, in Tibet a pair of Robin Accentors feeding lustily chirping young with my face only two feet away, and a Horned Lark feeding superbly camouflaged chicks at my very feet, while here at home the Yellow-wattled Lapwing which I could stroke or gently lift off her eggs!

It is quite apparent that if we could all be less belligerent and train our children not to throw stones etc., then wild birds would accept us as part of their world and we would satisfy our desire for holding the lovely birds by having them close enough to look at intimately and yet enjoy their confidence and share their vitality. We would be able to resurrect the Garden of Eden and like Adam walk with the beasts and the birds.

HOW SOON CAN THE WEAVER WEAVE ITS NEST?

A. Navarro, S.J.

Note. This has reference to the article 'A trend into the Anatomy of the bird's nest' which appeared in the July 1972 issue of the Newsletter (Vol. 12, No. 7).

The time factor. With reference to the time factor, spoken of in Vol. 12(9), September 1972 issue of the Newsletter by Horace Alexander of Rutgers Ave., Swarthmore, Pa., USA, the weaver birds require to collect and weave together the number of fibres needed to build their nests, I would state that the time factor is dependent on the weather, the variety of materials available, and the distance from which it has to be collected.

The influence of weather. The influence of weather may be of paramount importance in the case of the weaver bird, in order to carry on the formidable task of building in a short period of time more than one nest, since the weavers are polygamous. Weather plays a very important part in the proceedings of the breeding cycle; hence the weaver depends entirely on the monsoon. They cannot commence their breeding activities until the monsoon has set in and there is abundance of grass available to provide material for construction of the nest. In fact, if there be a time when the monsoon totally fails, there may not be a breeding activity for the weaver.

The number of fibres used in the construction and building of the nest varies greatly, being dependent upon the material available, and upon the initiative of the builder. The weavers usually attach their nest on palm trees and acacias; most of these trees are usually found in open areas with abundant grass, or near the rice fields. On one occasion I found a colony of weavers whose nests were suspended from a babul tree. Most of the nests were, in shape and size, replicas of the usual standard weaver nests. The material used was a short and curly fibre, which gave the nests a very untidy and flimsy appearance, very easily torn off. The nest when stretched out was found to be rather flexible and I have never understood how the fibres were bound together in this case. In such cases I do not doubt that the number of fibres to construct a nest of this type will be rather high.

Since the weather affects the breeding cycle, the weather may sometimes accelerate or even retard the tempo of the nest building activities, as happens in India, when suddenly there is a long spell of dry weather at the middle of the monsoon season. At this time one may notice several nests that have been started and almost finished and as the rains ceased, the heat warms the atmosphere and the weaver seems to cool down and almost forget its nesting activities.

It is only when the rains resume that the weaver colonies revive and there is a frenzy of shrills and activity.

The psychological behaviour. At this stage we are faced with another factor: the psychological behaviour of the weaver during the building activity - another important factor which

controls the time and the tempo of the activity.

Once a colony of weavers had settled on a large banyan tree; there must have been, altogether, almost a hundred nests. The banyan tree was on a slight elevation, surrounded by rice fields and large patches of grass. The activities of the colony could well be compared with a beehive during the spring season - weavers flying off and on from their nests in all directions, but no weaver flew further than fifty to seventy metres from its nest. By way of curiosity, we tried to time the assorted flights; we found on an average of a hundred to a hundred twenty-five seconds, some weavers had accomplished two trips. The flying off and on was rather swift, the cutting and making of the fibre was slower than the action of weaving. Now and then some weavers were moving around their nests as if they were supervising their own job.

Observations in Pune (Poona). Being in Pune for a short holiday just at the time when the weavers started their building operations, I noticed that a large colony of weavers had settled down in that area. Most of the trees were acacias and there was a small sprinkling of palm trees. The colony was made up of separate units, each unit of a different proportion - some containing up to 50 nests, and others no more than about 6 or even less. Just near my room I observed an acacia with nests that had just begun to take shape. Every day, not much earlier than 5.30 a.m. I could hear the sharp shrills so typical of the weavers when they absorbed in their building activities; the feverish assortment of shrills and fights and flights went on throughout the day with a brief interruption at noon when the activities appeared to slow down. Here again, by timing the activities I found that some weavers were weaving at the rate of 75-120 seconds per fibre. Considering that the breeding season has more than thirteen hours of daylight, it seems quite possible that with eight to ten days they can accomplish their arduous task of making and weaving together about 5000 and more fibres to produce the wonderful weaver's nest.

The making of the nest. As already pointed out in my last article, 'I have not been able to find any reference to the time the weavers need to build their nest'. Later in a series of notes on the Baya Weaver by Dr Salim Ali and V. C. Ambedkar, I found some enlightening information: the amazing speed with which the weavers can accelerate their building activities. "By August 7th or 8th fresh building activity has already restarted with great vigour; the majority of the nests were now in the early stages - from the initial attachment to the bell or helmet stage; the strong invasion of prospecting females spurred the tempo of their activities; thus, one nest started at 8.00 a.m. had the loop and one side of the dome completed by 3.30 p.m. with the blob of mud stuck within"

Nest repair. 'On the fifth day of incubation at 9.32 a.m. an oblong slit was made in a nest (number 17), then containing 2 eggs. At 9.34 a.m. the female alighted on the nest and examined the hole, looked here and there and entered within. She came out again at 9.35, but re-entered at 9.36 and spent nine minutes on the eggs. At 10.1 she inspected the hole again and tried to pull the fibres at the cut edge across the hole without success. At 10 a.m. the male who had not been there up to the time, saw the hole. He went away but came back at 10.36 and started directly to repair the nest, at first unsuccessfully by means of the existing fibres; later with the help of fresh material. At 11.30, i.e. in just under an hour, he had repaired the mutilation completely.'

Compared with the behaviour of other birds, the behaviour and activities of the weaver bird at the time of breeding somehow turn to be reversible. The courtship, the singing, the selection of the pair, all that procedure takes place once the nest is built. For we know that the female does not select the male partner; she selects the nest. That may be the reason why the male weaver undertakes such arduous and vigorous task in the construction of the nest.

A VAIN ATTEMPT BY AN IMPERIAL EAGLE

R. S. Dharmakumarsinhji

Most ornithologists do not speak highly of the courage of the Imperial Eagle. I have seen this species year in and year out in Western India. Much of its prey is robbed from smaller birds of prey and I have, however, seen it plunging to capture waterfowl not larger than a goose. Brahminy duck in their winter quarters graze some distance from the waterside unmindful of an Imperial Eagle settled close by or soaring high in the sky.

During the last week of December 1972, we in Saurashtra experienced a cold wave, not really very cold or freezing, but comparatively cold for the winter season. I was in central Saurashtra, Gondal and we were out on the Bhader tank environs on 31st December 1972. There were quite a number of Eastern Common Cranes in the open fields and while disturbing a small flock of about ten to twelve birds, I was amazed to see an eagle fly down from a tree and fly low with all his speed towards the cranes. The cranes seemed to realize the attack and the birds accelerated with quicker wing-beats. I almost thought the eagle would catch up and strike but for some unknown reason it could not fully catch up and just missed making the final six or eight feet it was from the cranes. This attempt to catch a large crane from a flock is the most courageous effort I have ever seen an Imperial Eagle (adult)

make to capture its prey. The eagle after making the vain attempt returned to the same tree. The time was about 5 p.m. The Imperial Eagle is not an uncommon migrant with us as I have seen it every year, generally close to tanks and in dry desert areas also.

BIRDING IN THE VIHAR AND TULSI LAKE AREAS OF BOMBAY

G. De

On the 7th January Bombay Natural History Society arranged a Nature Walk for birdwatching near the Deer Park of Borivli National Park and surely some members would report about their individual bags. My experience of that morning is not a rich one.

The chief pleasure came from watching 10 Brahminy Duck on the western bank of the Vihar Lake near the motorists' halting point. They were resting and preening - some on ground and others in water. Five of them had bright ferruginous plumage. They flew away after about 20 minutes on the approach of a person - 2 in one direction and eight in the opposite, all the time honking. After an hour the former two returned to a nearby spot to rest among Common Teals. There were 18 teal, sunning and preening. They were roughly separated in two groups, one of 7 males and 2 females and the other having the remaining ones. But I did not see any other duck on the ground or in the water, far and near, which is rather surprising, especially when I found more than 800 teal in the Powai Lake while returning home.

Among other birds, at Vihar Lake were: one female Pale/Montagu's Harrier, one Marsh Harrier, and one Blackwinged Kite. The last came along the bank, alternately hovering and moving forward and ultimately settled on a nearby tree, where I left it half-an-hour later.

My query about the dirth of duck was to some extent answered on the 13th January, when I saw more than 600 Common Teal sunning on the bank of Tulsi Lake near the old bungalow. Among them were, at least, 25 male Pintail too. It is the first time in the last five years that I have seen duck in the Tulsi Lake. Among other things seen in the jungle on my way to the old bungalow were a male and a female Scarlet Minivet, female Blue-headed Rock Thrush, 5 Forest Wagtails and one Haircrested Drongo. The last three forms were seen by me for the first time in Bombay. I was first attracted to the drongo by its rather crow-like bill, albeit narrower, and then gradually hairs of its crest and upturned tips of its outer tail feathers became evident. Forest Wagtails were feeding on the forest road and were not particularly shy. The thrush was perched for some time on the lower branches of a shrub in a shady spot and can then be easily mistaken for a flycatcher both in form and behaviour.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

The Editor would like to remind readers about the decision taken at the last Annual General Meeting when a prize of Rs25/- was offered for the best photograph of the year, either in colour or black and white.

This is the time when the attempt should be made. The Flame of the Forest (Butea monosperma), the Silk Cotton (Salmalia malabarica and insigne) and the Coral (Erythrina suberosa) are in flower and afford excellent opportunities for photography.

Incidentally the flowering of the Flame of the Forest in the Borivli National Park this year is magnificent. J. S. Serrao says that he saw the first flowering of the Flame of the Forest this season in late November at Pali Hill, Bandra, Bombay. This is most unusual for normally these trees only come into flower about early January. The Editor has also been informed that crows have started their nesting activities, and House Crows were seen collecting and building as early as 19th January. Perhaps there is some connection between this and the extraordinary weather we are experiencing.

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Membership.

So far 61 members have paid up for 1973. Will those who have not paid please send in their subscription. The Editor hopes to be able to list the names of members, Statewise, in the Newsletter at a later date.

CORRESPONDENCE

Sad state of our natural spots

I hope your garden is a veritable paradise with Forest Wag-tails, Ground Thrushes, etc. May I seriously suggest that (this) lovely spot be bequeathed - with all its population of Nature Lovers - to the Nation as a monument to sanity and culture? How impossible it is to preserve such beauty though it need not come in the way of development. Human happiness would increase. The senseless legislations being enacted by the Gujarat Government in the name of Socialism will deal a mortal blow to the already beleaguered Hingol Gadh jungle. We are suffering terribly on account of the senseless, short sighted policies of the Government and the cruel exploitation of the land by society. Even in the Gir Forest and the Girnar where the most dreadful droughts saw shaded retreats and fresh springs, water is not available. The rivers are either dry or heavily polluted, the forests a memory, and wells are piti-

ful puddles wetting the floor of deep holes. It is tragic. All this land, all the sunshine and all we have is dust, mirages and parched winds! Each succeeding drought will perforce be severer than the preceding until sense prevails and steps are taken with dedicated fervour to mend the terrible damage done.

K. S. Lavkumar
Rajkot

A dangerous act of a Black Eagle

It was middle of September last and because of heavy rains we abandoned our vehicles about 8 miles ahead of Tehri town in Tehri-Garhwal region of Uttar Pradesh. The alternate means of transport, i.e. mules and coolies were used and it took us three days to reach our destination.

It was on one of these days that we got a bus and I was sitting in the front seat. The road was kaccha and the weather very hot and humid, as it usually is in September at this altitude of 3000 to 5000 ft. On the way there were plenty of common hill birds and most beautiful ones met that day were the Scarlet Minivet, Blue Magpie, Himalayan Woodpecker, Whistling Thrush, Himalayan Tree-pie, and wagtails.

In addition to these I was able to spot on solitary Black Eagle flying at c. 300 ft above ground circling round one spot. I suspected it of preparing itself to catch some prey. My guess was correct, as very soon it dived down to the ground. But to my surprise it did not fly up again, which in the normal course it should have done after catching its prey. I became a little more interested in the incident and watched carefully as our bus approached that side. I could now see the eagle fighting with something unseen on the ground and struggling a lot. The eagle would sometime be flapping its wings, and at others it would turn upside down with paws towards the sky. I tried to, but could not either find out or guess as to who was the other fighter. Our bus took about one minute to take the turn and reach near the spot while from the other side three villagers came. Seeing the villagers, the eagle separated from its fighting partner and flew away. By now I was within 40 feet from the spot and saw a black cobra, about 3 ft long with an expanded hood with a very prominent U mark swaying from side to side. The villagers from the other side started throwing stones and after about two minutes the cobra dashed into the rocks.

After this encounter I could not wait to find out if the eagle again came in search of the snake. But all the time that day I was trying to attribute some reason for this fight, but failed. Could it be that the eagle wanted the snake as food? Or could there be some other reason for the two to

become enemies? Secondly was it the eagle who left the snake after seeing the villagers or vice versa? In my personal opinion it was the eagle that left the snake. Unfortunately I did not have my camera with me that day, otherwise I would have been able to get some very good snaps.

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A comment on the Newsletter for Birdwatchers

These days the Newsletter for Birdwatchers does not carry any news about the activities of the various institutions and government for protection and welfare of birds. This matter is important and valuable for bird lovers. As such matters of this nature should get significant place in the Newsletter.

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A TRIP TO PONMUDI - A tale of disappointments and delights

K. K. Neelakantan

To a birdwatcher ' marooned ' in the heart of an overcrowded, noisy city, with absolutely no prospect of indulging in his hobby unless some kind soul takes him out to the countryside, an invitation to a famous hill-station 3000 feet above sea level cannot but seem to be a gift of the gods. So, at 6 a.m. on 23.xi.1972 I found myself sharing the hard and narrow bench at the back of a jeep with another. We were bound for ' PONMUDI ' (literally ' Peak of Gold ') nearly 40 miles away. We were camp followers of a bevy of zoology students of a local women's college, out on a collecting trip. They had gone ahead by bus and we were to join them at Ponmudi.

From the foothills at about 2000 feet there was fairly thick forest on both sides of the road and an occasional bird call could be heard above the loud purring and groaning of the gears. From time to time the two Parameswarans (one of the local D.F.O. and the other the Professor in charge of the expedition) who were sitting in front reported some bird running into the bushes or flying off; but from my canvas cage I could see only solitary grey wagtails which gave us the right of way and then carried on with their insect hunt.

At 9 a.m. when the jeep stopped and I stumbled out to straighten my back, I saw that we were almost at the top of the hill. On one side was a patch of tea and on the other an ocean of

grass. A flock of swallows was busy mopping up the remnants of an insect host. We were at the gate of a tea estate and a prominent board warned us 'VISITORS ARE NOT WELCOME'. Nevertheless, a smart, young Assistant Manager not only welcomed us but put his house at our disposal so that we could eat our breakfast in style. His little garden had attracted a brown shrike, a leaf warbler, an ashy drongo, redwhiskered bulbuls and a reed-warbler which went on check-ing and churr-ing all the time. A shikra soared about. Later, in the estate itself, I saw a kite-sized bird of prey which I could not put a name to.

There were few trees within two or three miles of our 'base camp'. The whole area was rocky. Where the estate ended, grass took over - coarse, tall grass, spiky, and with razor-sharp leaves. After breakfast we drove to a spot not far from the Upper Sanatorium, the now-disused and fast disintegrating summer home of former Maharajas and Governors of the State. Here we found some thick sholas, and one side of the hill was clothed in thick forest. There was a pool close by, in which, according to legend, Seetha had bathed on her way from Lanka to Ayodhya.

The zoologists went into a small shola. Soon the place was resounding to their shouts, screams and laughter, for they found a thousand little slimy things hiding under stones and rotting tree trunks and greeted every discovery with a mixture of disgust and joy. For me, however, there was only unadulterated disgust in store. It was insufferably hot, and every bird in the place had withdrawn into the forest. There were a few common swallows flying low over the grass, hawking what I thought were invisible insects. But I was soon proved wrong. The insects were only too visible; and so was I to them. Hundreds of gnats and tiny flies formed clouds around my head, and alighting, began to explore my epidermis. Luckily they were not after my blood. Still, the nuisance value was considerable. I beat a hasty retreat from the spot, wading through waist-high grass. Suddenly I found myself plunging into a four-foot pit. It was a relief to find that it was not equipped with pointed strips of bamboo or a gin-trap or something worse. Later I was told that there were many such pits, nicely camouflaged by the tall grass, and that they were the legacy of an army camp at which lessons were given in jungle warfare. The army should add as the final lesson in the manual instructions on how to fill these pits and trenches after their use is over. It wasn't any consolation to me when the D.F.O. said that he too had tumbled into one of these pits.

Having come all this way to see birds, I decided to get into the forest. I would have scaled stone walls and swum across the deepest moat; but the thick and thorny undergrowth on the edge of the forest beat me. Behind this impenetrable screen were any

number of birds. But the noises they made were most confusing and my recollection of hill bird calls so hazy that the only voice I could identify was that of the scimitar babbler. My search for some gap in that thorny wall, a stream bed or a game path, was infructuous. After taking a good look at a party of small sunbirds which flitted about in a bush full of tiny flowers, I resumed my struggle with the grass. My hope of disturbing at least a pipit or an owlet as I crashed through the waves of grass remained unfulfilled.

Then there appeared in the sky, as if in response to my silent prayers, an angel. An elegant snow-white form with just enough black on its wings to make the white look more brilliant, it hovered just above me with gestures benedictory, only slightly marred by a touch of palsy. It was a lone blackwinged kite out for an early lunch or late breakfast. However, the poor thing was destined to go hungry. For an hour it sailed round and round the hill, hovering and falling repeatedly; but it never came down to the grass or the ground. It was an object lesson in patience and perseverance to me as I walked about cursing myself having lost a day's casual leave only to look at a sea of grass and be roasted in the sun.

Perhaps the bird did really bless me, for the zoologists decided that they would leave at 3 p.m. and stop in the forest on the way to collect a few more creepy-crawlies. So, at about 4 p.m., leaving the zoologists to probe the mud in a little pool, I walked along the quiet road for half a mile. Coming to a spot where the hill fell away steeply from the road, I sat down to watch a party of fairy blue birds leaping about in the canopy of a tree. Parties of hill mynas, bluewinged parakeets, minivets, a southern tree pie, an imperial pigoen and a few woodpeckers provided pleasant diversion. But then something happened which made me ignore everything else. A pair of lorikeets came into view as I was scanning the branches on which the fairy blue birds were leaping about. The lorikeets were courting. I was also lucky enough to watch the consummation, a sight I think few birdwatchers could have seen in the wild.

I hope the blackwinged kite which blessed me was also as fortunate as I was and found some thoroughly unexpected delicacy at the end of its frustrating search in that sea of grass.

BIRDS AROUND A SUSSEX GARDEN

Owen Martin

When I moved from London to the Sussex country, one of my first jobs was to put up a nesting box for tits. There was an old ivy-covered stump in the garden which seemed a likely spot, but as Spring was then advanced, I did not really expect tenants that season. But next morning a pair of Great Tits was prospecting, and in the afternoon the hen began air-lifting nesting materials. First she took in small root and grass bits; later she used strands of nylon from carpet off-cuts I had dumped in the garden for burning.

Apart from an early and unsuccessful attempt by Blue Tits to hijack the nest, all went well with my family and seven weeks later I saw the eight fledglings fly away with their parents.

When I cleaned out the box I found that all the inner nest lining was nylon; no traditional moss or hair had been used. Other birds also collected the man-made fibre; two Pied Wag-tails took it to their nest in a hole in the wall of the barn, and inevitably Passer domesticus cashed in. Soon the gutters and eaves of the house were festooned with his straw and nylon strands.

To revert to tits, our Great Tit Parus major is a brilliant bird - saffron yellow, olive-green and glossy black; his Indian cousin is a very dull monochrome fellow in comparison. One of our commonest tits, he's at home in city parks and the depths of the country. The Blue, Parus caeruleus -- smaller and a more uniform blue, with no yellow - is equally common. The British Handbook records a race in western Asia; I do not know whether this would include NW. India. I did not see any during my years there.

Three other tits come to the garden: Coal, Marsh and Long-tailed. The first two are small, dull variants on the Great Tit pattern; the Longtailed is the odd man out: pink, white and brown, with a tail longer than its little button body. It also departs from the usual hole nesting habit and builds a beautiful domed affair of moss, lichen and cobwebs, always lined with feathers.

With May came the flood of migrants: Swallows, Black-caps, Cuckoos, Martins, Flycatchers and the rest. Two cock Will Warblers claimed territories in the nearby orchard; they advertised for wives with song which could fool you they were Purple Sunbirds. Typical phylloscopi these Willows, green above and yellow below, with a pronounced pale eye-streak. Except in good seeing, you cannot tell them from Chiffchaffs: different song is the reliable guide.

Collared Doves Streptopelia decaocto (Ring Doves to you) were around when we arrived, and soon became commensal thanks to a daily grain ration. They were joined by migrant Turtle Doves, Streptopelia turtur who dust bathed in the sandy ground I was trying to coax into a garden, and tur-turred in courtship on the power lines. (The literature is confusing on the Turtle Dove races. Ours look like S. t. arenicola shown on plate 38 of Vol. 3 of the Indian Handbook.)

One evening in June white Barn Owl, Tyto alba came hawking over the fields. It stopped and rose with a Field Mouse dangling from a talon. Then it headed away over the hills: amazing how silently they fly! Later I learned from our village policeman (as interested in birds as in preserving the law - he has logged 143 different species in his five miles square beat) that the nest was in a hollow oak tree 200 yards from my house. Thereafter both birds usually came just before sunset; often they used the power pole as a machan, and removed many troublesome mice from the garden.

Tawny Owls hoot from the wood but I have not yet seen them, they are more nocturnal than the Barns. But a Little Owl Athene noctua is a daytime hunter. When these owls were introduced into the U.K. many years ago it was feared by some naturalists that they might prove troublesome; but they integrated happily with the resident avian population and no racial problems arose. Politicians, Dictators, please note?

To attract birds, we keep a hanging wire basket filled with pea nuts. Nuthatches soon found and now regularly patronise this free lunch counter; their upturned sword-stick beaks are ideal tools for the job.

Like the tits, they take readily to nest boxes, but cannot curb their impulsive urge to daub mud round the entrance holes - which may already be a tight fit. Why in evolutionary ages have they not lost this habit? As far back as post glacial times the encroaching forests must have provided holes of all shapes and sizes to suit the most fastidious nuthatch needs without mud-daubing, so why has the habit persisted? One can only assume they were originally rock cleft nesters like the Wall Creepers. Mud daubing of over-sized holes to keep out predators would then make sense.

Our nuthatches are Sitta europea, to my eyes very like your Chestnut-bellied Sitta castanea.

Of the local birds, the Great Spotted Woodpecker Dendrocopus major is one of the most spectacular - snow white, jet black and the most glorious salmon pink. And a beak like a pneumatic drill. We have a hazelnut tree: when the nuts ripened, the pair of woodpeckers stripped the crop in a matter of days. They took the nuts to a convenient forked branch where they cracked them with a single hammer blow; the kernels were swallowed whole.

The most closely resembling relative I can find in the Indian Handbook is the Himalayan Pied, Plate 53, but our bird is much brighter. (And confusion confusion, Dendrocopus seems to have become Picoides. The experts make things difficult for the simple amateur.)

Now on a cold January winter's day, Rooks, Jackaws and Gulls -- Blackheaded, Common, Herring and Blackbacked -- are quartering the stubble for worms and grubs, and Wood Pigeons are gleaning the last of the barley dropped from the combine harvester. Lapwings mew plaintively and continuous rattling clatter comes from a flock of Fieldfares, Turdus pilaris -- big, handsome thrushes wintering here from Scandinavia and even from behind the Iron Curtain. Splendid birds they are, slate grey and olive-brown above, cream and chestnut below, with the typical speckled breast. They will be with us now until April.

The Fieldfares bring my local bird species to 63 - hardly comparable with the Delhi 24-hour record - but then the count was made in a radius of only 200 yards from the house. And of these 63, over half appear on the Indian list or have closely allied Indian races. This merely shows that with birds, you can feel at home anywhere.

FURTHER NOTES FROM SAURASHTRA

K. S. Lavkumar

The Gujarat Information and Tourist Department has now published the 1973 Tourist Diary with the check-list of the Birds of Gujarat. It can be had from the Gujarat Government Tourist Centres at Delhi and Bombay; also directly from the Director of Tourism, Sachivalaya, Gandhinagar, Gujarat. There is one very big omission which could have been avoided had I thought of it in time, but the time was so limited that we had to do a rush job. I should have edited the notes on the various places of Tourist interest included in such diaries and added short notes on the bird haunts around each spot in addition to the usual information regarding archaeological sites. A pity, but now there is nothing that can be done. The twelve illustrations and the cover picture have been specially prepared for this diary by our member K. P. Jadav. If there are any complaints regarding the selection of the birds illustrated, it is I who should be taken to task. In the list I have purposely refrained from mentioning Saurashtra in the range of the Quaker Babbler, but I wish I had not because apart from the very old record from Rajkot which has occasioned raised eyebrows, we now again have a fresh record, one captured in netting operations at Hingolghadh. Unfortunately, the information got to me well after

the printing had been taken up. Oenanthe picata, O. capistrata and O. opistholeuca are included under the same species and subspecies in the Synopsis and as such they do not appear separately though the last two forms have been noted on several occasions.

I would be grateful if members who have been watching birds in Gujarat could send me notes of any errors in the status of individual species and of any additions they make to the birds listed here. In this way, we shall be able to keep this list up to date and whenever we are able to bring out a new edition the corrections can be incorporated.

Shri Nirmalkumar Dhadhal stays the entire year at Abu and when he was last here, I had asked him to prepare a checklist for the place as I consider this would indeed be most useful and in great demand.

BIRDS AND CRICKET

R. S. Dharmakumarsinhji

By birds I do not mean the unfeathered bipeds that tend to swamp our earthly environment and pollute the air. Nor in cricket do I mean that chirping insect which the artful Chinese have trained to sing and fight in their ingenious manner. I mean the birds of the Order Aves and that too only those seen in the Brabourne Stadium at Bombay during the five days of Test Cricket played between India and the M.C.C. (England) from 6th February to 11th February 1973.

Normally, as I watch from my flat or from the chairs of the C.C.I., I see mostly crows and pigeons and common kites flying over the Stadium and alighting on the roofs, trees and on the yellowish green lawn of the Brabourne Oval. With a closer view innumerable house sparrows dot the periphery, feeding on anything they find from crumbs to seeds and insects. The crows and kites search for worms and insects which are forced to the surface when the ground is flooded in patches. Whereas, wag-tails and swallows feed upon the minute insects which cover and fly above the ground. Normally, there are large number of crows and pigeons under the iron roof tops and verandas of flats and the trees afford roosts and shelter.

When the Test Cricket was played, all stands were packed full and many of the surrounding roofs and terraces were also packed with spectators. In all there were about 50,000 or more people. The sound of human noise at times reached a magnitude as would make the loud drone of an aircraft sound like a mild hum of a bumble bee. This intermittent hooting and shouting seemed to have an unusual effect on the birdlife of the Stadium. It caused the pigeons to fly across the ground rapidly as if chased by some imaginary falcon whereas the crows seldom ventured across the field. The two pairs of kites flew over the

sheltered stands and soared higher than they do normally. In the morning, some white wagtails kept to the shade of the East Stand. But the Common Swallows were the boldest as they flew low and circled in single file over the players. Evidently there was much to be gathered as food by way of minute flying insects over the open ground; they made all kinds of patterns in the air as they foraged and rose higher on thermal currents at midday. House Swifts were seen at dusk when play ceased, balling up over the flats. The usual flocks of pigeons were seldom seen. I saw a Blackheaded Gull enter the Stadium limits but it soon left for the bay on the west side. A pair of kites had nest in the west stand near the seventh column and through the binoculars I saw the bird brood. Although the pair of kites resented the noise they kept near the nest site with one of the pair brooding undisturbed. The jam-packed crowds gave no room for the crows and the few that were there never attempted to alight near the East Stand where peels of fruits and debris were thrown. Even after play, crows did not get a chance to pick up the food owing to the immediate cleaning of the ground of all rubbish. On the penultimate days of play, I saw one flock of pigeon alight near the screens on the North side and a group of sparrows collect the periphery near the NE. side; otherwise single sparrows hurriedly crossed the playground. On the 9th, a rest day for players, my wife saw pigeons, crows, sparrows, kites, and wagtails behaving normally.

During the lunch hour on 7th February I saw a pair of crows chasing a kite which was carrying some food in its bill. The kite circled up with quick wing-beats as the pair tried to snatch the food which eventually it could not succeed in doing.

Two butterflies, a White Emigrant and a Brown Tiger, were seen to edge into the ground as the match was in progress and pass through the stands only to disappear amidst the crowds.

The rustic swallows flew incessantly over the whole field in their quest for food and they appeared the least disturbed of all birds. The Swallow was the bird of the match for it was seen at all times of the day, from morning to evening, and it is interesting that it had enough food to eat at all hours of the day.

PLAYFULNESS OF A GULLBILLED TERN

Lalsinh M. Raol

While watching birds at Porbandar, I once saw a Gullbilled Tern (Gelochelidon nilotica) flying fairly high with a fish in its bill. I was curious to know as to how it would manage to swallow it while in flight. Suddenly, it dropped the fish but no sooner did the fish come down by a couple of feet, than the tern caught hold of it by a neat dive and ascended in the

air. I thought that the fish might have slipped from its bill while it was trying to hold it more favourably. But no! The fish was being dropped again and again, and was being caught in mid air every time. It was a pleasure to watch the bird's graceful manoeuvres in dropping and catching the fish. I counted 26 such repetitions. At last I got weary of it and diverted my attention to other birds, but the tern evidently seemed not to be tired of the game.

At the same place later on I saw once more a gull (probably the Brownheaded) which somehow dropped a fish from its bill while flying. It tried to catch hold of it in the air but proved to be a failure. The fish fell down into the water.

Really the terns are masters of agile and graceful flight.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Brig. A. N. Jatar, Commandant, Armoured Corps Centre and School, Ahmednagar kindly invited the Editor to give a talk on birdwatching last December. It was such a joy visiting the Cantonment. Cantonments exude evidence of good housekeeping - the trees are unmauled, the roads well swept and all the litter in the right place.

I had told the Brigadier that in the records of the Bombay Natural History Society there was a reference to a Marbled Teal (Anas angustirostris) shot at Ahmednagar by an Army Officer and I wondered whether he would be in a position to look up the old records relating to this duck. He was good enough to write back and say that from the Game Book of the Central India Horse he was able to ascertain that the bird was shot on 25th January 1947 at Kaperwadi about two miles from Ahmednagar Cantonment. The remark read: 'Very rare for this part of the world.' As a matter of fact there are no other records of the Marbled Teal having been collected in the Deccan.

* * * *

Mr N. K. Bajpai, Timber Extraction Officer, Kulu, writes: 'Would you please make it a point to arrange a tour programme in any part of Himachal Pradesh, particularly Kulu. You are requested to inform all other members who intend visiting Kulu to get in touch with me.'

I am sure that many members of our Club who trek in the mountains will be glad to contact Mr Bajpai, when they are in Kulu.

CORRESPONDENCE

Bird news from England

Just after Christmas I found a Tawny Owl dead on the lawn. Now the remaining one of the pair hoots To-woo-woo woo but there is no reply To-whit. I hope to hear a pair in the garden again shortly when mating instincts are aroused.

D. A. Stairmand
Oddicombe House Hotel
Chillington, Kingsbridge
S. Devon

Isabelline or Pale Brown Shrike in Bombay

On 28 January 1938⁷³ in the Vihar Lake environs, Dr S. R. Amladi drew attention to a shrike in a tangle of euphorbia and babul on the edge of the forest on the Lake side. As it was difficult to identify the bird with ease notes were made on its colour pattern and later compared with specimens at the Bombay Natural History Society. It is being determined as the Isabelline or Pale Brown Shrike Lanius collurio (isabellinus)⁷

This shrike is an exceptional visitor to our area and the only two records for Bombay go back to 1899 and 1935, both of which were drought years. During the 1899 drought, it is said a large number of unusual bird species were driven further down south, and a female was collected by J. M. Mason on the Esplanade in Bombay on 14.xii.1899. The second record is by Mr Humayun Abdulali who collected a male on 13.ii.1935 at Andheri.

J. S. Serrao

Zafar Futehally
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NEWSLETTER FOR
BIRDPWATCHERS

Volume 13, Number 4

April 1973

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AN AMATEUR BIRDPWATCHER

Mrs Clarice D'Souza

Looking out of our dining room window one day, my daughter Shaila and I chanced to see a brown and white bird perched on the drumstick tree, preening away like a well-trained model. We stood fascinated, until it flew away. 'What bird is it?' asked my daughter. I did not know, but I said we could find out. I remembered having bought an illustrated volume of Common Indian Birds by Salim Ali and Laeeq Futehally. We located the book but could not identify the bird. This little incident started us, as a family, on a new hobby -- birdwatching.

Yes, birdwatching right at our doorstep and outside our bedroom window! Is it possible that we lived in this locality of the United Services' Club at Colaba Point for five years and yet did not notice the wealth of nature's bounty around us? Recently while on a Bird Walk, Mr J. S. Serrao said to us that flora and avifauna must go together. While we are keen gardeners and conscientious tree planters, we somehow failed to notice the birds in our immediate environment.

Outside our bedroom window we have three trees - custard apple, guava and a variety of kurvanda. These trees appear to be a resting haven for many a small and large bird. Our interest started with the Koels. Every afternoon both male and female would come exactly at 1 p.m. At sunset they disappeared. Where

did they go? Why did they come at this particular time? It was interesting to see how the whole family got involved with the koels. My husband, home for lunch, would go to the window to watch for these birds. The children, back from a wonderful yet exhausting day at School, made a bee line for the trees to see if these new friends were waiting for them. The trees now became the centre of family interest and it is amazing how discerning the eye has become and how sensitive the ear. A rustle in the leaves is noticed by my younger daughter who comes whispering, with the air of a conspirator, and with her eyes alight with joy and wonder, 'Come and see Mama, such a beautiful bird!'. To Anjali who is 11 years old, artistically inclined and a dreamer by temperament, birdwatching has been a rewarding experience.

Last Sunday (25.ii.1973) she identified a Coppersmith. At first she thought it was a woodpecker. It was within arm's range from the window, so the exciting colours of its feathers could be clearly seen. We referred to our Bird Bible. Yes, it was a Coppersmith and this accounted for the unusual call of the bird that we had mistaken for the working of a rice mill. Our biggest thrill so far has been to see the Paradise Flycatcher, both male and female. I first saw the male perched on the telephone wire just outside the house. I rushed out quietly as I could, and was delighted to see its ribbon-like tail moving as it flew to the branches of the banyan tree. It was later seen on the Club premises and was enthusiastically admired by the Staff. The interest in birdwatching is apparently infectious!

The Pangara (= Indian Coral Tree) is in bloom, and the Golf Course is dotted with these trees so attractive at this time of the year. I have had a thrilling evening and morning, birdwatching - this experience has prompted me to write this article.

To come back to the Pangara - the birds are having their fill of nectar. These trees are full of birds and I noticed that only one species of birds on a tree at a given time. The crows appeared to be attacking the flowers; flocks of parakeets screeched their way from one tree to the other. They created such a din that I wondered if their dazzling plumage was a cover for their harsh voices. The Common Mynas were daintily going from flower to flower. I saw a Flowerpecker unobtrusively flying from branch to branch, its colour merging with the tree. At a nearby water point was a flock of Jungle Crows - our golf ball snatchers. The nesting season must have begun because I have seen one with nesting material in its beak. Three Gattle Egrets were walking gracefully along.

Unfortunately my dog, insensitive to my interest in birdwatching, had a go at them, and seemed rather surprised that they flew away. Five Hoopoes were feeding around the golf green. They apparently believed in peaceful co-existence for

my presence near them did not worry them. They were magnificent, with powerful beaks, I could not resist the desire to see them in flight, so I disturbed them and they gracefully flew off, only to settle about 30 yards away.

My next conquest was a Blue Jay. It was resting on the top of a water tap - immobile, beautiful. I stealthily walked closer but it flew a distance of 10 yards only to perch on the pin of the golf green. That short glimpse of its flight made my day - such glorious wings. The Blue Jay soon disappeared into a nearby tree.

The grass on the golf course is drying - apparently has gone to seed. There are a variety of birds feeding in groups. Pigeons and doves and sparrows in plenty, Babbler by the sevens; I saw a flock of Skylark (I hope my identification is correct) and a pair of Magpie Robins. Feeding and flying were two pairs of Little Green Bee-eaters. I saw only one Black Drongo resting on the lower branches of a casuarina tree. Three tawny eagles encircled the sky and gracefully landed on a golf green. Aren't they privileged? To a non-golfer like myself stepping on a green is taboo!! On the last flight before dark was a flock of Palm Swifts. What a wonderful time I've had. I've seen nearly twenty different kinds of birds on a single day. And these alone I can identify. How many more must my untrained eye have missed!

To conclude, I have not seen the brown and white bird that first aroused our interest in birdwatching again. Was it really a bird or was it a winged spirit sent by Nature to gift us with an awareness of the world around us? To that winged creature, spirit or bird, I am grateful; for it has shown us the way to many hours of quiet happiness; to my school-going children it has made them sensitive to the joy and wonder of Nature. What better gift can we give to our children who live in an urban fast moving world.

Postscript. Other birds seen in the area: (1) Blackheaded Oriole (2) Shikra (3) Common Sandpiper (4) Little Ring Plover (5) Tree Pie (6) Tailor Bird (7) Indian Robin (8) Sunbirds (9) Munia.

BIRDWATCHING IN A DROUGHT

S. R. Shah

For 15 days from 6.ii.1973 we combined birdwatching with social visits. Travelling by bus we covered Surat, Olpad, Jambusar, Baroda, Pavagadh, Dakor, Mehmdabad and Ahmedabad. We were pleasantly surprised to see migratory waterbirds -- ducks and waders - in eight ponds out of eleven.

We had learned from Shri S. K. Damania, a birdwatcher who had visited Nalsarovar in December 1972 that the migratory birds were not present as there was very little or no water there.

We felt they divided themselves in their onward flight according to their mysterious urges. And how have they distributed themselves? At first we thought that the birds have rationed themselves according to some factors like the size of the pond, its area which would be comparatively free from disturbance and molestation by man, the richness or otherwise of the food available at these ponds, the pond's remoteness from cities or populated places, etc. We could not draw any conjectures. Here are some of our observations. The numbers given should be treated as approximate.

Olpad pond visited on 9.ii and 20.ii.1973; size c. 5 acres: It lay along an extremely busy thoroughfare yet on the 9th we saw 1000 ducks (Brahminy majority), pintails, spotbills. Dabchicks, coots and half a dozen Painted Storks were also present. On 20.ii we saw 300 coot, 100 dabchick, and 100 other unidentified duck. The Brahminy, pintails, spotbills and painted storks were absent. Not a single Blackwinged Stilt; other waders hardly 20.

Jambusar. An exquisite pond, c. 50 acres, 10.ii.1973: Saw 30 duck - majority Brahminy; 300 Blackwinged Stilts; 200 other waders like sandpipers, plovers, stints, snipe, etc. In the mango grove on the bank were a number of greyheaded-, red-breasted- and fantail flycatchers and common redstarts. In a nearby leafless tree we saw what appeared to be buntings or yellowthroated sparrows - we could not identify them.

Baroda. Saw no birds at the Sayaji Bhag, a vast garden, except crows, common mynas and two peafowl.

We did not see a single bird at Sursagar, a tank, c. 6 acres, near Nyaya Mandir. But at a Sev-Ghatia-Chiwda shop a furlong away there were 3000 Bank Mynas because they are fed by the shopkeepers between 5 and 6.30 p.m. In the morning there were hardly a dozen present here. There were no Common or Brahminy mynas for the feast.

Earlier on 7.ii I had seen 5000 Bank Mynas near Surat Station bus stand.

Pavagadh, elevation 3300 feet, 13.ii.1973: A couple of grey tits, scavenger vultures, and crested buntings.

Mehmdabad, a lovely pond, area c. 7 acres, 15.ii.1973: Saw 200 duck, majority Tufted Pochards; 200 waders including 100 Blackwinged Stilts. On a nearby solitary bare tree were c. 600 Red Turtle Doves.

Kankaria-Ahmedabad area, masonry built tank c. 50 acres, 16.ii.1973: Saw 2000 duck: spotbills highest, Brahminy duck, dabchicks, pintails, tufted pochards; common teal hardly a dozen. There were 1000 waders of various species but no black-winged stilts and no coots.

Chandola-Ahmedabad area, lake c. 100 acres, where water existed, 17.ii.1973: This lake has appeared a couple of times in our Newsletter. Here we saw 20 duck (Brahminy 8), 600 waders including 100 blackwinged stilts; 2 flamingoes, 2 grey herons, 12 openbills, 4 sarus, 1 pied kingfisher, and 1 Large Egret.

Jetalpur, c. 5 acres, 18.ii.1973: Saw 100 ducks, 200 waders including 100 blackwinged stilts.

Aslali, c. 2 acres, 18.ii.1973: 100 duck, 200 waders including 100 blackwinged stilts.

Gandhinagar, 18.ii.1973: In the bed of the Sabarmati as far as we could see there were 50 duck, 50 waders, 50 grey heron, 8 sarus, and 2 large unidentified birds like Stone Curlews but without 'goggles'.

Dakor, area 75 acres, 19.ii.1973: Birds were centred in the remotest 5 acres; 600 ducks (majority tufted pochard), 200 blackwinged stilt, 500 other waders, 100 spoonbills, 12 painted storks, 6 grey herons.

The most unusual thing we felt was that we did not see a single oriole in 15 days and saw more than a couple of thousand Rosy Pastors on a single peepal tree at Ahmedabad.

We read in a local Gujarati daily a news item attributed to Shri David Reuben, which said that the ducks had visited Kankaria probably for the first time. If the people behaved well and did not molest them, they would visit it again and again and Kankaria would become as interesting as Nalsarovar. We visited Kankaria twice and I have a feeling that hardly anyone took notice of the birds or felt that it was a rare or beautiful event.

Mr S. R. Shah's note on the migrants in Gujarat during the present drought is very interesting. It would be worth while for members to watch how the migrants would react to the lakes and ponds listed by Mr Shah in 1973-74 migration season. In this connection J. S. Serrao brings to my notice a note entitled A VISIT TO THE NULL AFTER THE FAMINE, by Reg. Gilbert (J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc. 13: 702-3; 1901). The note gives the author's experience of Nalsarovar in February 1901 following the drought of 1899-1900. Reg. Gilbert in the years prior to the drought was a regular camper at Nalsarovar during Christmas, but was

away from India during 1899 drought to observe for himself how the migrants reacted. He was informed by friends that during 1899 winter the lake was absolutely dry and there were no migrant waterfowl in Nalsarovar. In 1900 the rainy season happened to be scanty, and paucity of migrants was reported from all over the Bombay Presidency. The author on his return visited the Nalsarovar in February 1901 and found that **various** aquatic migrants, enormous numbers of which made a winter home of Nalsarovar absented themselves though it contained an average quantity of water. In mid February however a few duck appeared, but no snipe; a few pelicans and flamingos were seen and geese heard at night. Coots were not in their usual numbers; quail was not about. Puzzlingly however Nalsarovar which was absolutely dry during the drought teemed with fish, and his men pulled out quite some 3-pounders from it. Concerning the waterfowl Reg. Gilbert was hesitantly of the view that in 1899 the birds must have come to Nalsarovar as usual but finding no water thought it useless to come again in 1900-1901 winter. - Ed./

BIRDING IN THE BORIVLI NATIONAL PARK, BOMBAY

S. R. Amladi

The morning of 28th January 1973 was unusually cold but this did not deter about thirty odd birdwatchers from joining the Nature Walk arranged by the Bombay Natural History Society. Starting from the Deer Park we strolled in groups through the woods towards the edge of Vihar Lake where all the groups converged to compare notes on the birds seen that morning. We 'bagged' about 58 birds, but as most of them were those that are commonly encountered in that area I shall mention only a few of the interesting species we saw.

In the scrub bordering the Lake a Stonechat flitted from bush to bush and all our efforts to approach it close were thwarted. A female Marsh Harrier perched haughtily on a projecting rock presented a fine sight against the light of the morning sun. As we were watching the harrier it took off gracefully to sail and glide a few feet off the ground. A few Desert Wheatears were scattered about the lake's edge, and we could observe one of them for a long time. It would pick up a titbit from the ground and fly off to sit on a boulder which was peppered with its droppings. Presumably this was its regular feeding ground. Among the mixed assemblage of Grey Wagtails and Common- and Spotted Sandpipers we picked out a solitary Yellowheaded Wagtail. A small flock of ten Brahminy Duck (Ruddy Sheldrake) and about a score of Common Teal floated lazily on the lake close to a spit of land jutting into it.

The Brahminy Duck were much paler, almost whitish, than the illustration in Dr Salim Ali's The Book of Indian Birds, and Mr Robert Grubb remarked that this was because the duck were in their winter plumage.

Across a little nullah which flows into the Vihar Lake from Tulsi Lake we could see our Editor, Mr Zafar Futehally, shooting away at birds with what appeared to be a small cannon mounted on a tripod. I wonder what trophies he bagged with his Spiratone lens. As we were about to call it a day we were regaled by a Blackwinged Kite which gave a superb aerodynamic display of hovering flight a few hundred feet directly above us. While we were still watching it agog Mr J. S. Serrao's keen eye spotted a Blackeared Kite. To the uninitiated it would certainly have looked like an altogether different raptore.

We parted company eagerly looking forward to the next Nature Walk.

The next Nature Walk was held on 11th February this year in the environs of the pond at Borivli National Park. The pond formed by the damming of a stream, had a luxuriant growth of waterlilies and we spent over two hours watching waterbirds at this pond. Our count showed Lesser Whistling Teal, Coots, Indian Moorhens, Bronzewing Jacanas and Pheasant-tailed Jacanas, among other common birds. It was quite refreshing change to see these waterbirds which would move out of the area as the pond dried up.

While scanning the edge of the pond one of us saw a dead myna suspended from a branch of an acacia bush. Some of us hurried to the spot and found that the myna had died some days earlier as its body was dried up and shrivelled. It was found hanging suspended from the branch by a strong thread which was entangled in the toes of one leg, the other end of the thread having entangled in the thorny branch. It could be seen that this was not the handywork of man but was a chance occurrence. It is difficult to say how this tragedy might have been brought about but what is obvious is that the myna did not use its beak to break the thread and free itself but rather frantically tried to fly thus exhausting itself to death.

THE BOOTED EAGLE IN SAURASHTRA

R. S. Dharmakumarsinhji

I have been for years watching the movements and behaviour of the birds of prey in the western parts of India and wherever I travel.

In Saurashtra, the Booted Eagle, is being seen regularly and in fairly large numbers. It is, I fear, taking the place of the Tawny Eagle, which seems to be losing ground. The Booted

Eagle as far as I know him, is a migratory eagle with us and can be easily confused with the immature Brahminy Kite or even Common Kite if not seen clearly. A small eagle, it is the one now generally seen from autumn to spring and although it may hunt in pairs during the nesting season, I generally see him hunting alone, though one or two birds are often seen in the same vicinity.

Two instances on 22 and 23 January 1973 convey to me the eagle's courageous behaviour. On the 22nd I saw a Booted Eagle dive down in the shallow creek of Gaorishanker Tank, Bhavnagar and catch hold of a coot. The eagle was unable to lift the bird from the water and kept the prey submerged. In making attempts to fly, it got its wings wet and had to keep them above water lest it should sink. For over 20 minutes I watched the eagle make attempts to fly with its prey but in vain. Other birds including waterfowl and storks and pelicans came near to watch. The coot could have been drowned but somehow it was not, and finally, the eagle had to let go the coot which though very dishevelled joined its group.

The second instance is of a Booted Eagle diving down on a Black Ibis which had left the waterside on an islet on the tank on 23.i.1973. A quick turn of the Ibis as it rose made the eagle miss its prey. The ibis is a heavier and larger bird than the eagle. In my Birds of Saurashtra I have given a good description of the Booted Eagle for easy identification.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Borivli National Park, Bombay

Several members of our Club who are regular visitors to the Borivli National Park have drawn the attention of the Editor to the unchecked cutting of trees which goes on in this Park.

Regretfully the Editor too has on almost every occasion heard the sound of the axe, and has on a number of occasions apprehended woodcutters carrying away headloads. It is evident the situation is most serious and the authorities must think of new ways of tackling the problem.

The appointment of Honorary Tree Wardens is a possibility which should be considered.

Members are requested to send in their comments on this suggestion to the Editor. If there are a sufficient number of people in the Bombay area who are prepared to give their time for the preservation of the Borivli National Park a delegation could go to the Minister of Forests with concrete proposals.

A Request

If any member has a spare issue of the November 1972 Newsletter would he please send it to

Mr H. R. Bhat
Virus Research Centre Field Station
Post Office Box No. 29
Sagar (Shimoga Dist)
Mysore State

CORRESPONDENCE

A heron colony in Himachal Pradesh

While staying at Ghumarwin, Dist. Bilaspur in Himachal Pradesh we observed a big colony of herons on a large Krishna Chura tree adjacent to the local police station in the heart of the town. Enquiries indicated that the birds were new comers to the area.

The colony consisted of nests of the Little Egret (Egretta garzetta), the Cattle Egret (Bubulcus ibis) and Paddy Birds (Ardeola grayii).

R. N. Mukherjee & M. Chandra
Solan, Simla Hills
Himachal Pradesh

Callousness to trees

During Holi festival a certain element of people traditionally go out with axes and choppers to cut down live trees for Holi fire. I would request you to co-ordinate with the Police Department to save our trees. I am particularly referring to the Dadar Parsi Colony and surrounding areas like Five Gardens and Matunga area.

B. A. Palkhivalla
785A, Mancherji Joshi Colony
Dadar, Bombay 14

[Just before Holi festival, the Police Commissioner issued a public notice warning people against indisciplinary behaviour during Holi. It is important that in the coming years the Notification should include acts of violence against trees during Holi a large number of trees are hacked and burnt by lawless elements. - Ed.]

An attempt to increase our membership

Taking a hint from the report of the Annual General Meeting of the Birdwatchers' Field Club of India, I have made arrangements to get the names and addresses of those members of the local British Council Library who regularly borrow books on birds. If, when the list reaches you, you could send them specimens of the Newsletter and suggest that they should become members, the response may not be bad. I too shall try to contact the persons and persuade them to get the Newsletter regularly.

K. K. Neelakantan
Trivandrum, Kerala

ERRATUM

Newsletter Vol. 13, No. 3 - March 1973

p. 10 for 28 January 1938 read 28 January 1973

Zafar Futehally
Editor, Newsletter for Birdwatchers
32A, C. D. Barfiwala Marg
Andheri, Bombay 400 058

NOTES & COMMENTS (Addenda)

In response to a letter written to Shri M. B. Chaudhari, Minister for Forests, Government of Maharashtra, drawing his attention to the urgent need of instituting strong protection measures, the Chief Conservator of Forests, Shri S. S. Buit has written to the Editor regarding the formation of Honorary Wardens. Members will be kept informed of further developments but we do hope all those who can will agree to lend a hand and assist in the preservation of this beautiful National Park.

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Newsletter for Birdwatchers

VOL XIII NO. 5 MAY 1973.



NEWSLETTER FOR
BIRDPWATCHERS

Volume 13, Number 5

May 1973

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WHY DOES A CROW SLEEP WITH A MYNA?

Madhav Gadgil

Why does a crow sleep with a myna? Or a parakeet with a kite? Or, for that matter, why do egrets prefer to sleep in large crowds instead of just by themselves or with their spouses? These are some of the questions currently puzzling students of bird social behaviour.

Quite a few species of birds seem to prefer sleeping in a large crowd. Examples familiar to all of us include the House Crow and the Jungle Crow; the Common Myna and the Rosy Pastor, the House Sparrow and the White Wagtail. Many lines of evidence indicate that such social gatherings, also known as communal roosts, are a very deliberate affair. The birds really want to sleep together. It is not as if they are forced to crowd together for want of space, but in fact go in for a lot of advertising stunts to ensure that a large number collects together at the roost.

These communally roosting bird species not only advertise their roosting site, but also the flight path and the various intermediate stations on the way to the roost. Let us take the Common Myna as a typical example. The mynas will be noticed feeding in pairs or in small loose groups until an hour or an hour and a half before the sunset. At about this time, though, they begin to lose their interest in feeding and

start consultations with other pairs or groups about their plans for the night. They will repeatedly give the flight intention call without taking off. This is the familiar ahmmmm sound invariably made by any myna as it takes off the ground. The calls may go on for five to ten minutes before all the mynas in the area are ready to quit. Then, the whole group may take off and start flying in the direction of their roost which may easily be at a distance of some five kilometers.

The groups beginning this roostward journey will be small; of four to eight birds. As they fly along they keep on a chany, chany call. This call serves to advertise the roostward flight to other mynas. Groups which are still on ground become attracted to a flock flying overhead and may join it. With increasing size the flock becomes more and more attractive to other mynas and the flock may soon swell to twenty or thirty.

By this time, the flock will spot a large gathering of mynas, perhaps a little but not much out of the way of the beeline to the roost. The flock will be attracted to this gathering of a hundred or more and land amongst them. This is an intermediate stop: a place where the various flocks from perhaps a third of the area feeding the communal roost will hold a gathering for half an hour or so. Birds in the gathering call a lot, and do some desultory feeding.

After a while, the gathering begins to dissolve and flocks of ten to fifty mynas take off and head directly to the roost. Hundreds, sometime thousands of mynas thus congregate at the communal roost. It is at these roosts that the most spectacular mass displays of birds are to be witnessed. The birds at first settle rather loosely around the roost; but they gradually form tighter and tighter groups of several hundred birds. Then, all of a sudden, the group takes off. How the mynas manage it so that the entire group is off in a neat formation within a split second has always been a source of wonder to me. The formation, perhaps twenty abreast, and several hundred strong may describe a semi-circle of a hundred or a hundred and fifty metres before settling down again. Even a solitary myna with its white wing-patches looks pretty enough in flight; these aerial displays of hundreds of mynas are, to me, one of the most beautiful sights. One may witness five or ten such flights before the group settles in for the night in some large tree; a peepul, a copperpod or may be a rain tree. But having chosen one or two neighbouring trees, they pack themselves in just those trees ignoring all others around. There is plenty of lively activity in the process. The birds fly to and fro incessantly. One day I timed them and found that no bird stayed at one place for more than a minute and a half. This is accompanied by a great din of hundreds of birds talking at the same time. This lasts for some thirty minutes before the birds quieten and doze off.

What is the purpose of these gatherings? One very good guess

is that it is to share information on where the feeding is good. When the birds wake up in the morning, some may know of a good place from the previous day's experience and will fly straight in that direction. Others, who had a bad time the previous day may simply follow them and thereby be led to a good patch of food. If this is the true function then most communally roosting birds should also be flock feeders. This is broadly true, but there are exceptions like the Pariah Kite.

Another possible function is defence against predator. Although the large roosting group may be more conspicuous to predators, it may protect the members more effectively by the use of warning calls. In a large group of several hundred, the chance that at least one bird will detect a predator before it can strike must be pretty good. In fact some experiments in England showed that it was impossible to catch by hand even a single White Wagtail sleeping in a communal roost. If however the wagtails were disturbed when they came to the roost and were forced to sleep as scattered individuals, then it was quite easy to catch them one by one. The prevalence of mixed communal roosts such as those of parakeets, mynas, and crows also favours this hypothesis. Since a crow has little to tell a parakeet about food location, their affinity is more likely to be due to a common hatred of owls and a desire to foil them.

There are other, more fanciful, hypotheses about the function of communal roosts. One such suggests that the birds gather together to find out how many of them there are in the area. If they figure that there are too many, they can wisely decide to pack up and leave in search of greener pastures; or, even more altruistically, not to marry this year; or, if already married, not to produce any babies. Many scientists feel that the birds could not really be so public-spirited. But then they may merely be judging others by themselves.

THE MYSTERIOUS ABSENCE OF THE CROW IN THE PALNI (PULNEY) RANGE, KODAIKANAL, SOUTH INDIA

Br A. Navarro, S.J.

Almost twenty years since my last trip I was once more in Kodaikanal in the October of 1972, with full determination to verify and confirm some curious observations concerning the absence of crows, i.e. the Common House- as well as the Jungle Crow, in the Palni (Pulney) Hills. Father Ugarte, Professor at the Sacred Heart College, Shembaganur, Kodaikanal, and one who has spent most of his life there, and Father Fuller, a keen and a very efficient collector, have both made a valuable collection of the avifauna of the Palni Hills. Part of Fr Fuller's collection is at present with the Bombay Natural History Society

and both have assured me that they have never seen a crow throughout the Palni Range.

During my last visit I was very keen in obtaining as much information as possible to confirm my previous observations. From every corner of the Palni Hills we got the same reply: 'NEVER'. But from the Perumal settlement, situated just half way up the road to Kodaikanal town we got the most interesting report. The people there said that about fifteen years ago, suddenly a small flock of crows (they could not define clearly whether this flock was of the Jungle or the Common House Crow) appeared in that locality; apparently, for the sake of novelty, the crows were most welcome. They remained in that spot for a short time but it so happened that they left in the same way they had come, and since then a crow has never been seen.

It is not less curious to note that side by side with the absence of crows, I also noticed that the Tree Pie was as much absent. Whenever I questioned Father Ugarte and Father Fuller on this point, their answers were vague and doubtful. It was only later, when I consulted the Registers of the Bombay Natural History Society, that I found there were no records of crows and tree pies collected from the Palni Hills. The tree pie, in its behaviour, has some points of resemblance with the Jungle Crow, preferring almost the same kind of ground, bold, noisy and active, usually moving in pairs or small parties. Their calls, sometimes, are melodious, but more often loud, harsh, raucous, which can be heard from a long distance and not easily unnoticed. The fact is that no member of the Crow family has so far settled or established itself in the region of the Palni Hills. There are plenty of crows on the plains and foothills, but from an altitude of 100 metres upwards, towards the summit of the Palni Hills, no crows can be seen.

Crows have always been a great interest to mankind, even from the ancient times. The Bible tells us that the first bird that Noah relieved from the Ark to verify whether the deluge had subsided was a Raven (Crow). It is commonly held today that the crows are possessors of conspicuous characteristic qualities: they are intelligent, bold, curious, active, noisy, aggressive, bullies, and even mimics to a certain degree. They have followed the haunts of man everywhere. As the crow is not finicky in its choice of diet, it will eat almost anything and everything it can swallow; it has been able to adapt to and survive all kinds of conditions and environments.

Considering all the conspicuous features and their ways, we find that crows have conquered and settled in all sort of environment. But now comes my double question: First. Why have the crows not been able to conquer and settle in the Palni Hills? Second. Is there any element in the Palni Hills that is either missing and hence necessary for their nature, or is there some element there that is repulsive to their nature?

WINTER VISITORS TO JUHU, BOMBAY

Winston Creado

In addition to the usual winter migrants, e.g. golden orioles, hoopoes, wagtails, etc., I have recorded the following species this season:

The Redbreasted Flycatcher (without the red breast, of course) stayed for quite some time and this is the first time that I have recorded it here.

One morning in November (1972), a juvenile Blackbird pursued by crows flew into the drawing room and perched upon the pelmet; later, it descended and sat upon the settee all morning.

The Pied Crested Cuckoo was observed in my garden on the 19th of November (1972) and I am sure this is the earliest pre-monsoon sighting*.

The Kestrel also visited me once, as it did last year. I saw a kestrel also on the western edge of Bhavan's campus at Andheri, and this is probably the same individual that sometimes strays over the Juhu area.

With Mr Richard Waller, a British ornithologist, I visited the swamp bordering the Juhu Airport, and there, Mr Waller identified Kentish Plover, Bartailed Godwit (winter plumaged). There was a large cluster of Avocets in the middle of the swamp, as also little egrets and reef herons, redwattled lapwing, brahminy kite, blackbellied finch-larks, and a large assortment of terns and gulls. We also saw a Yellowheaded Wagtail in a rather faded plumage.

This swamp, as I have mentioned before, at its best moments resembles a mini-Bharatpur, with snowy drifts of gulls and egrets fluctuating across its burnished face. This is because the birds have easy access to it from the open sea, by crossing a narrow strip of coconut groves, and because of the wide open airport lands adjoining it; and it is perhaps the only spot within the city itself, where such a spectacular congregation of birds may be observed.

If the Juhu airport were to be abandoned, as recently suggested and the airport lands leased out for building, then this gathering ground for waders would cease to exist.

A lesser danger is from the ever-increasing cluster of hutments that have sprung up on its northern flank.

Perhaps the Birdwatchers' Club could make some attempt to preserve this spot as a small sanctuary.

To return to my garden: Every evening for some days, a grouping of 20-30 Grey Wagtails was to be observed, cavorting through the sunset, alighting on and upsurging from the neighbouring trees and terraces.

*19.xi.1972 is the latest date of stay of the Pied Crested Cuckoo in Maharashtra rather than 'earliest pre-monsoon sighting' as suggested. See Newsletter Vol. 12(11), p. 9. - Ed.

Some time in December 1972 I was truly delighted to observe a female Scarlet Minivet upon the casuarina tree. I don't suppose it was an escaped cage bird as it was in a very well-groomed condition. It stayed here all through the morning, in spite of being pestered by the ever-belligerent black drongo.

SULTANPUR LAKE BIRD SANCTUARY

Ranavijay Pratap Singh

For one who wants to capture both the subtle charm and the conspicuous splendour of the beauty and poetry of birdlife Sultanpur Bird Sanctuary is an ideal place. 45 km from Delhi and 13 km from Gurgaon, easily approachable by road, it is gradually becoming a vital point of attraction for tourists, naturalists and lovers of the open air.

Various species of waterbirds congregate here in winter. In the early winter mornings this Lake exhibits a soul-stirring panorama of birdlife in all its glittering glory. Unforgettable are the white dazzling lines of the flamingos with brilliant scarlet in their wings, the lovely and lively bar-headed geese swimming buoyantly, thousands of ducks of many species with almost all the colours in the world joyfully feeding in the Lake or idly dozing on the bare margins, terns and swallows showing acrobatics in the air above the surface of the water, pelicans, ibises, storks, cranes and herons decorating the sombre water of the lake, the various formations of flights of cranes, pelicans, flamingos and spoonbills garlanding the blue sky above, the honking, quacking, trumpeting and many other sounds, the splashing of the water and whistling of the wings, all these combine to captivate the heart of the observer.

There is much to be enjoyed and explored at the Sultanpur Lake. Many important pages from the great Book of Nature are flying here and there. If one has the enthusiasm to gather a few of them and the patience to go through them then he certainly will add much to his knowledge.

Various species of birds of prey hopefully visit the sanctuary and there is no scarcity of those species of birds which have nothing to do with the Lake or its water. From our magnificent and majestic National Bird down to the lovely little Purple Sunbird, I have been able to list 230 species around the Sultanpur Lake area during 1972.

A couple of years ago this Lake was a veritable paradise for the greedy guns. Professional hunters, joy-shooters and local shikaris all used to fill the air on this lake with the smoke of gunfire. Death loomed large at this Lake as hundreds of pretty living things were bagged mercilessly to be cut and put into cooking pots and finally to be devoured by watering mouths.

Thanks to the Haryana Forest Department that they heard the pitiful cries of one of their many forsaken and neglected babies and changed a slaughter house into a life-emitting sanctuary.

It is a pity that we have very few sanctuaries both in the Panjab and Haryana while compared with the great influx of migratory birds that visit us during the winter season. Many wetland areas are vanishing rapidly. In Ludhiana district of Panjab the great expanses of natural sanctuaries along the Sutlej river which still live in my memory of early boyhood days, have completely disappeared giving place to the so called progressive farming. We human beings are indeed climbing the rungs of the ladder of evolution rather very, very quickly, trampling underfoot our life-mates which are on the lower rung. After travelling days and nights and covering thousands of miles when the feathered foreigners visit our country with high hopes of food and refuge, we welcome them with the bang, bang of guns filling their empty bellies with pieces of lead. Instead of providing them with well-furnished resthouses with all the facilities in the world, we are depriving them of even the minor things of life. How hospitable and highly evolved we Homo sapiens are when we are constantly destroying the natural welcome and reception houses for the great, bold travellers, the messengers of international peace and the living examples of the free citizens of the World Federation!

Cannot India have many more sanctuaries like the Sultanpur Lake Bird Sanctuary?

NESTING HABITS OF THE PURPLE SUNBIRD

Kameshwar Pd Singh

The nest was situated on a branch of a lemon tree just by the side of my house in Barh (Patna), about 10 feet away from a building under construction. The noise and the crowd of labourers would not deter the birds from building the nest, just 5 ft above the ground. It was mostly of cobwebs, dry leaves of the lemon tree and shippings from the gunny bags lying near by, and lined with soft straw and dry grass. On the outside, the nest looked like a lump of cobwebs and was perfectly camouflaged.

The female took prominent part in its construction. The male only came occasionally and took no part in the building activity. The first egg was laid on 17.ii and the second was found on the morning of 18.ii. The female brooded all night and generally left the nest about 7.30 in the morning. The male visited the nest from time to time but was never seen brooding. The female left the nest in the noon and returned only in the evening.

On 20.ii when the female was brooding the male visited the nest. The female gave a shrill warning cry and the male left in a hurry. On 21.ii I examined one of the eggs. It was pointed at one end and was dull white spotted with grey, the spottings being dense at the round end. By 24.ii the female began brooding day and night and only left the nest for one or two hours for feeding. On 9.iii the nest was found empty perhaps stolen by the children of the neighbourhood.

On 17.iii morning I again found the female brooding; when she left the nest I examined its contents and found two eggs. On 28.iii the eggs hatched. The female remained for some time in the nest. Perhaps the newly hatched chicks did not need much feeding. Feeding was generally done in the mornings. The male now also joined in the feeding but its rounds of the nest were not so frequent as those of the female's. On 5.iv the chicks were developing feathers on wings and undersides, the underside feathers being bright yellow.

On 6.iv the nest was torn by a foolish servant who mistook it for a bunch of cobwebs. I became very anxious about the chicks in the nest but was happy to find by evening that the female had repaired the nest to some extent and was sitting in the nest.

Feeding was generally done by the female. In the morning the male also took part in the feeding of the chicks. The frequency of feeding in the morning was every 8-10 minutes. Very small insects and grubs formed the diet. In the evening the frequency slowed down, to about once in half an hour. On 9.iv tail feathers were seen developing and the beak was becoming pointed. 11.iv the chicks had developed feathers all over the body. They resembled the female with the difference that their breast and underparts were a bright yellow.

When a chick fallen from the nest was handled both the parents flew near me and boldly dashed at my hand as if they would snatch the chick therefrom. The chick was restored to the nest. On the 12.iv morning the injured chick was found lying dead on the ground and the other chick sitting on a branch being fed by both the parents. The chick was being attended to by the parents on 13.iv morning. At last they were able to fly one chick. It appears that the loss of eggs and chicks is very large in these birds.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Dr Salim Ali has received so many awards and medals that one more or less does not matter too much. However, the latest addition to his galaxy is the Ivanowsky Institute of Virology Jubilee Medal from the U.S.S.R. Academy of Medical Sciences.

*

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*

Mahim Waterbird Sanctuary

Members of our Club will be delighted to hear that finally on the initiative of Begum Ali Yavar Jung, the wife of the Governor of Bombay a Bird Sanctuary in the Mahim Creek is going to be established and its formal inauguration will take place on 1st of May 1973.

Readers will recall the letters written in the press about the desirability of creating this Sanctuary in view of the fact that it was the home of so many resident and migratory birds, including such spectacular ones as the Avocet, the Bar-tailed Godwit, the Blackwinged Stilts and the Large Reed Warbler. Unfortunately a great part of the creek has been reclaimed and much damage has already been done to a most beautiful natural area. However, one must be grateful for small mercies and if the Government and the Municipality agree even now to take energetic steps and prevent further aesthetic and ecological erosion, gulls, terns and waders of many kinds will continue to flock here and be a source of enjoyment to the citizens of Bombay.

As presently conceived the Sanctuary will cover an area of 15 acres between the Vaitarna Water Supply Main Pipeline and the Railway. However, an additional area of 80 acres between the pipeline and the Mahim-Dharavi Link Road as well as the area on the west of the Railway Lines up to the Mahim Causeway is yet available. Let us hope that the authorities will be persuaded to designate this entire area as a Sanctuary in course of time.

Honorary Wardens for the Borivli National Park, Bombay

In continuation of the Notes and Comments item in April 1973 issue of the Newsletter a list of 30 names from among the members of the Bombay Natural History Society and the Birdwatchers who could act as Honorary Wardens has been sent to the Forest Department. The Department's response is now awaited.

CORRESPONDENCE

Pelicans opt for Randarda Lake near Rajkot, Gujarat

For the first time in the history of the Randarda Lake near Rajkot (Saurashtra) more than 1500 Pelicans were seen on the 11th and 16th February. It was an extraordinary sight to see these birds swimming and wading in the shallow water of the Lake. They were seen arriving in flocks of 15 to 50 at a time and while alighting each bird just glided smoothly close to the flock which was already wading. I observed this from within about 50 yards, the entire flock floating slowly

all in one direction in an organised ' drive ' as it were, their big bills and eyes prominently set for any fish which erred within striking range.

On the west shore of the Lake, Thakore Saheb Shri Pradyuman-sinhji has a beautiful bungalow on a 200 feet high ridge from which a lovely panorama of the Lake can be had - an ideal spot for birdwatchers. Very few people know that the Pradymna Bag situated close to the Randarda Lake is a Sanctuary for birds. Shooting is prohibited. Once 40 species of birds were counted in this 40 acre orchard of mango trees. The most prominent among these are partridges, quails, crows, parakeets, peacocks, hoopoes, flycatchers, robins, sunbirds, doves, pigeons, wagtails and lapwings.

During the months from November to February, the usual visitors among migratory birds are: ducks, Demoselle Cranes, storks, terns and pelicans. This year, the onslaught of pelicans is heavy because the Nal Lake of Saurashtra has become bone dry due to scarcity of rains during 1972 monsoons.

✓Sursinhji S. Jadeja

Blackheaded Bunting in Salsette, Bombay

On the evenings of 14th and 16th April 1973 the surroundings of Vihar and Powai lakes in the Salsette Island were teeming with Blackheaded Buntings (Emberiza melanocephala). It was a sight to see so many of them either feeding on the grass or flying in twos and threes to the water's edge for a drink.

I have never met with these birds in the Salsette Island in my earlier peregrinations. Neither did the Bombay and Salsette Survey come across it in the Salsette though it recorded the bird from the mainland of Bombay.

Could it be that they visit us for a short duration on their return journey to their breeding haunts - there were none present at Powai Lake on 22.iv? Or is this just an adjustment the birds made in their itinerary induced by the prevailing drought conditions in the country?

J. S. Serrao

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June 1973

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AN INNOCENT IN ICELAND

Aamir Ali

At the end of April, I spend a day in Iceland on the way to New York and thought what fun it would be to try 'a day's worth of birds' in that remote country. The scheme misfired a bit, partly because many migrants had not yet arrived there, and partly because a very nippy little gale blew throughout my stay. In spite of pullovers, gloves, socks and hats, which my overwhelmingly hospitable friend Jon had provided, our excursions were limited to spasms of about 15-20 minutes, after which we gladly retreated to the car to warm up. Jon was armed with the Icelandic version of A Field Guide to the Birds of (Iceland) and Europe; I with the English version. How many buyers can there be for the Icelandic version in a country with the delightful total population of 200,000?

Round the coast, of course, there are masses of gulls. Several of the rocky islands - black rocks sticking out of the sea - provide protected space for nesting colonies. We climbed a little hill facing a cliff rising from the sea, and saw scores of gulls getting ready to nest. The wind, which constantly tried to blow us off our cliff to see if we could fly too (we lay down on our stomachs to cheat this design) did not seem

to bother the gulls at all. They perched on the tiniest ledges, unconcerned. How is it that when they fly they can use the lightest of air currents, but when they sit the wind does not seem to affect them at all?

Do others have as much difficulty as I do in distinguishing between different species of gulls? These I took to be Herring Gulls (Larus argentatus) though dammed if I could see the red spot on the bill. Later we saw hundreds of these gulls (and others) in the fishing village of Grinkavik and in and around Reykjavik itself. I was a little nervous lest the fishermen take us for spies of British cod fishermen, but nothing happened. I also think I identified Common Gulls (Larus canus) and the Great Blackbacked Gull (Larus marinus). One which gave me particular pleasure was the Blackheaded Gull (Larus ridibundus) which we saw not only on the coast but inland over some of the lakes as well. I had waved goodbye to thousands of these gulls in Geneva only a few weeks ago as, having acquired their black caps, they took off northwards after their winter sojourn there. Or could they have come from India, where they also winter?

Golden Plovers (Charadrius apricarius) were frequent, trim and very dapper. They had only just arrived and Jon told me that the Icelandic saying is 'One plover doesn't make Spring'. Bending my head into the glacial wind, fumbling with binoculars which had grown stiff with the cold, I couldn't but agree with him. I took it from this that swallows don't get to Iceland, but I see from the Field Guide that they have occasionally bred there. What is the difference between the Golden Plover and the winter visitor to India (Pluvialis dominica)? Or between the Pluvialis dominica and Charadrius dominica, the Asiatic Golden Plover?

We made a fascinating trip to the Pingavalla Lake, (or Vatn, if you want me to prove that I know Icelandic) north of Reykjavik. On the shore at the upper end of the lake is one of Iceland's most notable historic sites, where the Althing, or Parliament, first met some 1100 years ago. Every June, the Icelandic notables gathered there to adopt laws and settle national affairs. There is a canyon where their horses could be left and couldn't stray away; a deep pool where women condemned to death were thrown in with a stone round their necks (men were executed). If the British have the Mother of Parliaments, they say in Iceland, we have the Grandmother. The Declaration of Independence was made at this same historic spot on 17th August 1944.

However, we found no assembly of elders, no criminals being executed or thrown into pools, but only two Greylag Geese (Anser anser) feeding among the half frozen marshes. They had orange bills, so presumably were a. a. anser, or the W. European race, and different from the one with the flesh-pink bill which winters in India. Jon told me that there were large breeding grounds of these geese further inland, often visited by

Peter Scott. A development project threatened to flood the area and destroy this breeding ground, but there was some of organising a fight against this. Alas, even Iceland is not immune from the catastrophes of development.

Along the lakeside, at various points, were summer houses belonging to Reykjavik residents. They were unoccupied at this season, except for Redwings (Turdus musicus) which were common, and allowed two half-frozen birdwatchers to approach quite close.

On the way back, from the car we saw a Ptarmigan (Lagopus mutus) which the Icelanders eat for their Christmas dinner. They obviously lack not only swallows, but turkeys too.

At one place, farmers were burning grass in the field and Jon told me they were hurrying up with this because after 1 May they would not be allowed to do so. Why? Because it disturbs nesting birds. What a civilised law.

We also saw ravens (Corvus corax) and two raptors winging their way slowly along a cliff face. They were too far off to identify but after a consultation of the Fiel' Guide I feel they must have been Gyr Falcons (Falco rusticolus). A similarly frustrating long distance view of some swans led to more agitated consultation of the book, and the conclusion that they must have been Whooper Swans (Cygnus cygnus).

In the heart of Reykjavik, there is a lake, rich in water birds: among them Mallards (Anas platyrhynchos) and Horned Grebes (Podiceps auritus). Nearby were some Oystercatchers (Haematopus ostralegus); another species which, I believe, winters in India too.

In Reykjavik, in a flower shop with a hot house, there was an Indian Hill Myna (Gracula religiosa) in a cage. I tried to speak to it in Hindustani, but it spoke only Icelandic. These grackles seem to be increasingly popular as cage birds in Europe; a few months ago I saw one in a remote mountain inn in the French Alps. I wonder if much is known about the conditions in which they are caught and shipped?

The bird list for the day appears a little meagre, but it was a fascinating day in all respects.

OBSERVATION ON THREE SPECIES OF BHUTAN PHEASANTS

Major Gen. T. V. Jeganathan, PVSM, AVSM

Over the past three years, I have kept under observation at HA DZONG, 9200 feet three of the several species of pheasants found in Bhutan, viz. Monal, Blood- and Kalij pheasants. They are housed in a half inch mesh aviary some 35 feet in diameter. Within I have planted high altitude bamboo (Arundinaria), the flowering shrub Budelia lindliana and a few other bushes. Standing willows, junipers and plum trees have also been encompassed by the netting. A small brook flows through the enclosure and its purl adds to the natural surroundings.

One of the disadvantages to even the half-inch mesh is that a timid bird in its early captivity tends to dash itself against the netting damaging the base of its bill. Blood Pheasant in particular is prone to this. I have lost several on this account dying from, it so appeared, bill injury, and no doubt shock. One may consider a still smaller mesh.

Birds were trapped by the local method of snares, Monal and Blood Pheasants at 12,000 ft and Kalij at 9800 ft. For their roosting, I erected a few wooden platforms eight feet high and three feet square. Only the Monals favoured these roosting platforms whereas the other two species preferred the shrubs or boughs of the trees.

Monal. In the first year of the monal's captivity no eggs were laid. His Late Majesty, a keen naturalist, suggested that some animals should be inducted along with the pheasants and kindly presented me with a pair of musk deer for the purpose. The experiment was successful for in the next season, the two monals, served by the single male, laid nine eggs. Alas, none hatched as the birds would sit only for an hour or two each day and then leave the nest. Eggs were laid on the platforms, initially constructed as roosting places.

Being wiser this year, I removed the eggs of both birds and have placed them under domestic hens in clutches of four, three, four and one. Another single egg is in an incubator at PARO, 7500 ft and kept at a temperature as for poultry eggs at 102/103°F.

Of the first clutch of four placed on 5 April 1973, one egg was found broken on 27 April, and apparently consumed by the hen. The few parts of the shell remaining were broken into very tiny fragments. On 5 May another was broken and a partially formed chicken with distinct feathers was seen.

The mating season is mid March to the end of April. The mating call of the female is distinguishable from the normal call. The answering call of the male to the mating call of the female is very different to its normal call. Both have been recorded on a tape. Eggs were laid between 4.30 p.m. and 6.45 p.m. on dates given below. When about to lay, the bird makes a low moaning sound likened to a cat in pain. Details of eggs laid by both birds are as follows:

	<u>Bird 'A'</u>	<u>Bird 'B'</u>
Average weight	60 g	60 g
Colour	Buff	Buff
Markings	Reddish brown blotches	No blotches
Size	2.5 inch length, 1.75 inch diameter	2.5 inch length, 1.75 inch diameter
Eggs laid	11 (2, 4, 8, 12, 21 to 23, 24, 27, 30 April and 3 7 8 May)	5 (2, 4, 12 April and 21 & 23 April)

Some time back I had sent a few specimens of Monal skins to the Bombay Natural History Society. Mr Humayun Abdulali who was then cataloguing the birds wrote the following:

Bhutan Monal9 others including one
from Sikkim

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| (1) Crest, c. 50 mm and much shorter than in others | Longer |
| (2) Basal shaft of spatulate feathers of crest with narrow edging | Shaft naked and with no fringes |
| (3) Head, crest, neck and upper back bronze green | Metallic green |
| (4) Upper plumage, rump, tail-coverts dark shiny green | With purple gloss |
| (5) Very slight traces of metallic colour on tips of a few under tail-coverts | More prominently marked |

The size and the well-developed spurs render it unlikely that a juvenile plumage is represented.

Blood Pheasants. During the mating season which is the same as that for Monal, the female seemed to call all through the day. But unlike the Monal, there appeared to be no difference in the call of the two females. The blood red colour of the male at this season turns richer and deeper. One was trapped in early April this year and laid no eggs. The other, caught as a chick two years ago, laid eggs as per details below:

Average weight: 28-30 g; Colour: Deep buff; Markings: Heavily blotched with brown varying sizes, some very tiny; Size: 1.8 inches length and 1.3 inches diameter; Shape: That of a small country hen's egg but sharply pointed at one end, even to the touch; Eggs laid: 5 (2, 4, 7, 9 and 11 May).

Of the three, this species seems less timid than the other two and possibly could be tamed with perseverance.

Eggs were laid on a tree in an artificial nest moss (?). It rejected the more convenient platform nearby.

Till the day (25/iv) it laid its first egg, it showed no interest in the nest, but on that day it flew to a platform, seemed to discard it, and finally chose the nest as its laying place. Eggs were laid between 3.30 p.m. and 5.30 p.m. and the details are as below:

Average weight: 35 g; Colour: Buff with tiny grey markings; Size: That of a small country hen's egg; Eggs laid: 8 (25, 27, 30 April and 2, 4, 7, 12 & 13 May).

A clutch of three was placed under a domestic hen and four in an incubator.

Hatching. Four sitter hens were locally procured to hatch these eggs. The details of eggs placed under each hen and the incubator at PARO up to date are given below:

<u>Sitter</u>	<u>No. of eggs</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Remarks</u>
Hen No.1	4 Monal	5.iv.1973	(a) On 27.iv one egg broken, the shell found in very small pieces, most of the contents missing, presumed eaten by hen (b) On 5.v one egg broken a semi-formed chick with small feathers found (c) Hen still sitting on 38th day. Eggs removed on 39th day.
Hen No.2	3 Monal	18.iv.1973	All three eggs hatched on 16 May
Hen No.3	6 Monal	27.iv.1973	No result yet
Hen No.4	1 Monal 3 Kalij	30.iv.1973	"
Incubator between 102°-103°F	1 Monal 1 Blood- 1 Kalij	5.v.1973	"
Incubator	1 Monal 3 Blood- 1 Kalij	18.v.1973	

At the time of writing, it has been 38 days since the first batch of eggs were placed under sitter No. 1. As I was beginning to have doubts on the success of my experiments, Sitter No. 2 hatched all the three monal eggs on the morning of 16.v. It would appear that Monal eggs placed under country hen hatch out in about 28 days, while the weight of each egg was approximately 45-50 g. The colour of the chicks is akin to the female monal. One of the chicks however was larger than the others and is slightly darker. Would this turn out to be male? I am fairly confident the sitters No. 3 and 4 would hatch their eggs successfully.

I am leaving Bhutan shortly. His Majesty has very kindly agreed to let me take the animals and birds with me to Delhi. My plans are to shift them to Delhi in October/November to avoid the Delhi summer

MIGRATORY RESPONSE OF THE REDHEADED BUNTING

Mervyn Sequeira

On 30th March 1973 we obtained a pair of Redheaded Buntings (Emberiza bruniceps) and housed them along with other birds in our aviary. They settled down rather well and in a few days got into excellent condition.

Then on the night of 10th April I heard an occasional peep call, very much like a sparrow's, coming from the aviary, and found that both these birds were flying about and trying to get out of that end of the aviary facing the garden and the sky. This we observed for the next six days, and realised that they were feeling the urge to migrate. This restlessness would start at about 8.30 p.m. and last as late as 2 a.m. (later than that I have not stayed awake to check). They could see perfectly in the dark. What is interesting is that during the day they were totally inactive, only moving about to eat, drink and bathe.

On 16th April we got them ringed with the Bombay Natural History Society's rings, with serial numbers 69301 for the male and 69302 for the female. In the evening we placed them in a cage and placed the cage on the terrace. As usual they were calm till about 8.30 p.m. and then they started flying about and trying to get out. What was amazing was that they continually faced North-Northwest direction and tried to get out only in that direction (which would be the correct direction as they are supposed to migrate to Europe, via Pakistan and the Middle East).

It was a clear night and at about 10.30 p.m., convinced that they were well oriented, we released them.

I think that it is fairly obvious that these birds are night migrants that rest and feed during the day.

I hope they will reach their destination. If they are ever found again I would like to be informed.

MAHIM CREEK AS A WATERBIRD SANCTUARY

J. S. Serrao

It is gratifying to read (Newsletter, May 1963) that the Mahim Creek is being declared by Government into a Waterbird Sanctuary on the initiative of Begum Ali Yavar Jung.

The earlier history of this bird refuge is wrapped in oblivion. Neither that keen observer Maria Graham who left her impressions of Mahim in her Journal of a Stay in Bombay in 1809, nor the Gazetteer of the Bombay City and Island noted for information given in footnotes to its pages tell us anything about the congregation of birds in the Mahim Creek. The Creek must have been

a traditional haunt of the migrant hordes from times immemorial because of the cultivated and wooded country which continued to prevail in the Salsette till very recently. And the migrants in their numbers must have fallen victims every season to the powder and shot of "Anton, Pascal, Dominic or what you will", the then "sportsmen" of Salsette immortalized by Dr Salim Ali and Mr Humayun Abdulali in the introduction to their paper on the birds of Bombay and Salsette J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc. 39(1): 90; 1936/.

The Second World War in 1939 came in as a real saviour to these migrants. In the wake of the War came in the Defence of India Rules prohibiting shooting for sport either by civilians or army personnel within the limits of Bombay. Thus an end was put to the holocaust of the innocent migrants by pot-hunters in the Mahim Creek.

With Independence came the Bombay Wild Animals' & Wild Birds' Protection Act of 1951, considered to be a model of an Act for the whole of India as far as wildlife is concerned. This Act closed Bombay and its suburbs for shooting and thus rendered the area now covered by the present day Greater Bombay into a vast sanctuary. But as all sanctuaries are of little use unless adequately guarded (a difficult task indeed), Mahim Creek was a happy hunting ground for reclaimers of land and beautifiers of Bombay. Let us hope that this vandalism is now ended for good.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Excursions

The Editor would like to draw the attention of our members to the fact that a number of Bombayites, viz. Dr S. R. Amladi, Dr G. De, Dr R. N. Vasa, Mr Bansi Mehta and J. S. Serrao go almost every week either to the Borivli National Park area or elsewhere on Nature Walks. All of them are keen naturalists and knowledgeable birdwatchers. Members interested could arrange to go with them after contacting them in advance.

Remittances from Members

In many cases money orders come in without the full name and address of the remitter on the coupon of the M.O. form. This creates complications while posting up these amounts. Will members kindly take the trouble to put in their full name and address on the coupon in the future.

Economic Ornithology

The Bombay Natural History Society recently organized a seminar on Economic Ornithology. The Proceedings will soon be published by the Society.

CORRESPONDENCE

Drought and Birdlife in Saurashtra

The present drought conditions are very severe and the desiccation is complete. The birdlife is suffering acutely and quite a few species will be endangered by the time rains come. Even humans are finding it more and more difficult getting enough water for drinking. Something very drastic on a countrywide level will have to be undertaken if the future is not to be worse.

This morning (21.iv.73) we have placed water receptacles at various places in the compound for birds. A pair of Redwattled Lapwings are making ready to lay on the back lawns and it is interesting to watch their behaviour. Of course the chicks have a very bleak future since there is no water where they can get to. A Blackcapped Blackbird is hopping around in the dry shrub-beries and we hope that it will be able to get to its cool retreat and not die in the heat on its way there.

Lavkumar J. Khacher
Jasdan, Gujarat

An interesting observation on Sirkeer Cuckoo

Has any one experienced the fight between a Sirkeer Cuckoo (Taccocua leschenaulti) and a pair of Stone Lizard (Agama tuberculata)? Last June I discovered a nest among the shrubs along the Kalka-Simla Road, with two chalky white eggs of the bird. The male of this pair attacked a lizard which was creeping out from a stony cleavage near the nest. The lizard's mate now came up for the rescue, and the aggressor retreated.

R. N. Mukherjee
Simla Hills, Himachal
Pradesh

Communal roosting of Crows and Mynas

I was very much interested to read Shri Madhav Gadgil's article on Crows sleeping with Mynas in May issue of the Newsletter.

It is not always that mynas and crows roost together. One can see the communal roosting of mynas in the Viramgam (Gujarat) railway station where under the platform sheds thousands of mynas roost without a single crow. Mynas of Viramgam get sufficient food from passengers thronging there day and night. I have seen mynas on the platform in search of titbits even after it gets quite dark.

At Rajkot I have seen communal roosting of crows exclusively on trees near Rajkumar College compound. In the Rajkot Palace compound I have seen crows and mynas roosting together in the same manner as described by Shri Gadgil.

Sursinhji S. Jadeja
Rajkot Dairy, Rajkot

Appointment of Tree Wardens

I was very happy to read the news about Tree Wardens. It is a pleasant surprise that Government is serious about preservation of forests. But how will the appointment of Tree Wardens prevent tree cutting? All that the Tree Wardens will be able to do is to report about tree cutting. What action will follow? As it is tree cutting goes on openly and does not need any reporting. I am given to understand that there are 22 forest guards for the Borivli National Park which has an area of c. 25 sq. miles. This number is quite sufficient to prevent tree cutting, if they are serious about their duty and do not collude with the tree cutters.

We shall also have to consider the problem of giving alternate occupation or employment to the Adivasis of the area. Honey culture is a good alternative. We have also to tackle the problem of sadhus in the area.

I would further suggest mobile courts in the area and strict measures such as hard labour (even for a day) for an offender. There are many points requiring detailed discussions before we make concrete suggestions to Government. Half-hearted measures will not succeed and will only aggravate the situation. I therefore suggest a meeting of interested persons before finalising things with Government.

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R. K. BHATNAGAR.

Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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ONE WEEK IN LUCKNOW (4th to 11th January, 1972)

D. Ray

Kikikik!. Kikikik! Chirarik! called the Pied Kingfishers (Ceryle rudis) as they flew back and forth across the canal. From where I stood on the eastern bank, I could just make out six kingfishers sitting in the gloom on the opposite side. First one, then another came flying low over the water, leaving ripples at each downstroke. They would approach kikiki-ing, hesitate, then flutter back again.

As soon as I move away, the birds calling loudly, flew to the bank where I had been standing and after a bit of fluttering disappeared into it. It was then 6.05 p.m. and almost dark.

I located the nesting hole the next day by searching from the opposite bank 25 metres away. It was below a slight overhang on the east bank 30 cm above the flowing water. Subsequent measurements showed the hole to be 8.3 cm wide, 7.7 cm high and sloping gently upwards. It was at least 104 cm deep, at which point my probe got stuck. There were faint scratch marks on both sides of the entrance and a bit of loose soil along the centre of the tunnel. There were no marks from faeces and no pellets were visible near the mouth of the hole.

Most of my observations during the next seven days were done from half an hour before dawn till an hour after sunrise and from one-and-a-half hours before sunset to half-an-hour after.

Quoting from my diary for the 6th: 'I had positioned myself on the west bank opposite the hole at 6.10 a.m. It was then still dark with the stars visible. The east had a pale yellowish tinge. The red-wattled lapwings (Vanellus indicus) and the

spotted owlets (Athene brama) could be heard calling freely. By about 6.20 a few crows were flying around. At 6.30 a medium sized bird flew by and settled on a jamun tree. It was a white breasted kingfisher (Halcyon smyrnensis) perched on a branch with its beak horizontal. From time to time it would raise its head slightly and give a single cheek!, sounding like a squeaky door.

At 6.34 faint wheezy kooiin-kooiin, teen-teen sounds could be heard from the hole across the canal. The first bird emerged at 6.37 and with loud chi-r-rik, chi-rarik flew across and settled on the bank. It was followed in quick succession by five other birds which settled nearby on the bank.

The birds settled in two groups of two and four with some distance (c. 3 m between them). They kept up a constant keen-keen, tooin-tooin interspersed with chi-ra-riks. Finally, three of them flew west and started hunting for their breakfast, over a large patch of shallow water next to the canal. The others flew upstream.

The birds appeared to be a family of two adults with two male and two female young. The younger birds were as large as their parents, with equally long bills. I could only distinguish between the adults and the young by their calls and behaviour. Both the adults and the young were fishing, sometimes alone, more often in groups of two or three. The young were partially dependent on their parents for food. Whenever a young bird was near an adult it would look in that direction and give wheezy kooiin-kooiin, teen-teen calls. They would also pursue their parents while flying, giving the same calls. These seem to be the begging calls.

When engaged in fishing, especially if they were flying, the kingfishers kept up a continual ki-kee, ki-kee, kirarik-kirarik, etc. They were quieter when perched and silent when hovering.

During hovering, the bird faces into the wind, body axis roughly at 45° and the dagger-like bill pointing almost straight down. I timed a number of hovers selecting at random. Out of 44 observations, the 2-4 second hovers accounted for 59% and 3 second hovers alone were 36% of the total. The longest hovering period recorded was by a youngster. It lasted 18 seconds. One to 10 seconds was more common.

The pied kingfisher's method of fishing is well known but will still bear repeating. A hungry kingfisher will fly over the water and start hovering at a likely place anywhere from 2 to 10 m above the surface. Usually the bird will move on and hover over three or four different spots before making a try. It may also drop a short distance and hover again. Finally it will dive head first. If the vertical dive is from a height, the first part of the dive is usually with wings open. Two to one metre above the water, the bird closes its wings. It hits the water with a splash and disappears.

At this point, in the dives I have been able to watch closely, I have observed the bird bobbing out, wings closed, bill in line



Fig. 1. Bobbing after a dive

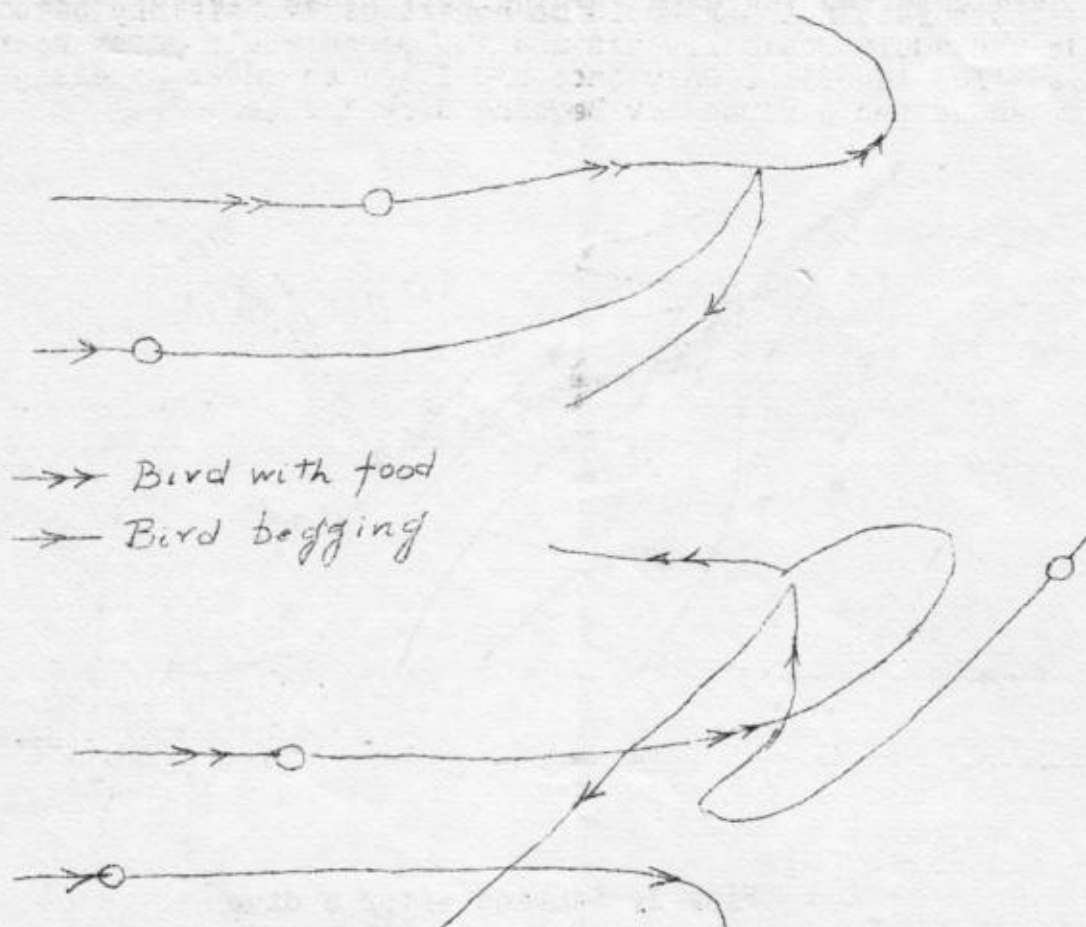
with the body and the axis roughly 70° . The bird slides back almost out of sight. Then it rises again, takes off heavily and continues fishing. The initial bobbing is so fast that one is likely to miss it altogether if one blinks at the wrong moment. I cannot say for certain if this bobbing occurs after every dive, but it definitely takes place some of the time.

The birds did not seem to catch anything on most of the dives, though as the adults swallowed their prey in flight it was always difficult to tell whether they caught anything at all. The young were always seen to perch before swallowing. They were quite inept about it.

Surprisingly, almost all observed feeding of the young was done in mid-air. This somehow has not been mentioned in any of the books I have come across. Quoting again from my diary "two birds came flying down the canal one following the other. The bird flying above was holding something whitish lengthwise in its bill. The pursuing bird swung up and for a moment their beaks touched. I could not make out whether the food was transferred or the first bird swallowed it."

Again "one of the kingfishers came flying down the canal at 4 m height, calling with a fish in its beak. Trailing behind and 2 m below came another bird. Just then a male (young) which

was sitting on a wire above and ahead of them pursued the



Figs. 2 and 3. Flight paths

leader. After a small chase the leading bird looped and with its bill and body vertical, transferred the fish to the bill of the male. This bird then flew to the bank and proceeded to swallow it." It took quite sometime about this as it could not get the fish into the correct head-first position.

I saw this feeding two or three times every day and some things emerged. The bird (adult) with food would come flying and calling towards the hole. It would be pursued with wheezy begging calls by any young nearby. This second bird would always be flying behind and below the first. The adult would fly some distance, turning and twisting in the air as though to throw off its pursuer. All of a sudden it would brake momentarily in the mid-air and bill down, transfer the fish to the second bird. At this point the bird receiving the food would

be below the bird giving it and though both birds had their wings outspread neither would be hovering. Immediately afterwards the adult would fly off and the young would perch nearby and swallow the fish. Only once did I see an adult hovering 15 cm above fed a youngster begging from the ground.

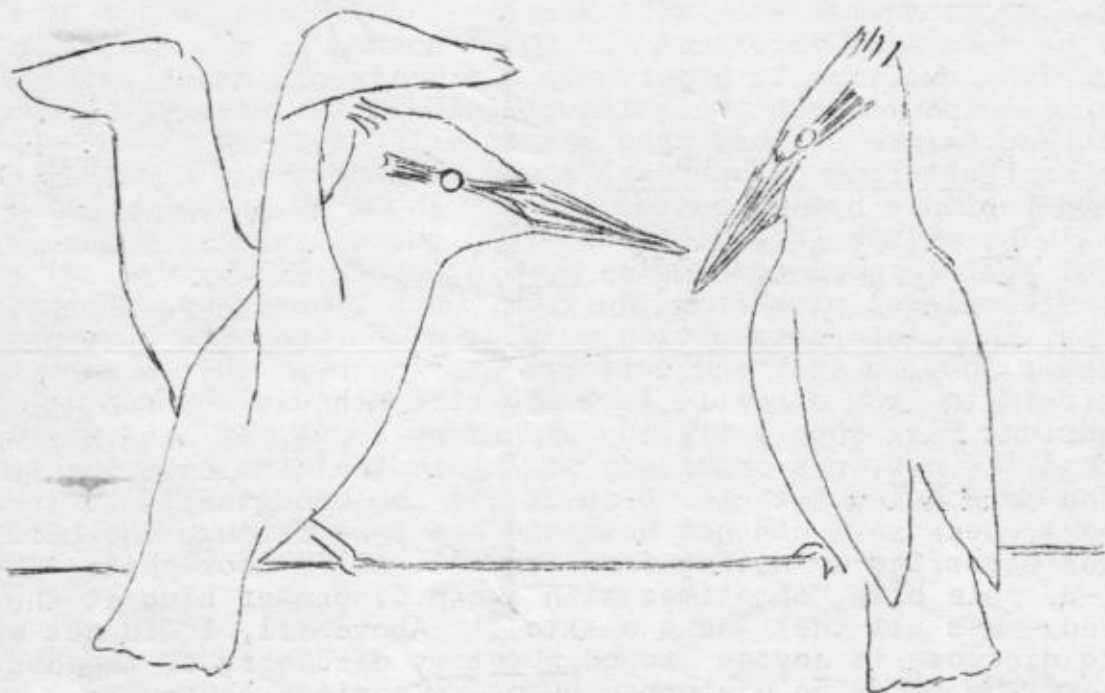


Fig. 4. Wing raising ceremony

Sometimes when a bird alighted close to a perching bird one of them would raise its partly folded wingstiffly above its body (for about a second). I saw this happen six times in the eight days. In one case the second bird responded by mounting (but not copulating with) the bird which had raised its wings. The significance of this wing raising ceremony is not clear.

The pied kingfisher has an alarm call which sounds like kikikik-kikikik-kikikik. They gave this call together with chir-ra-riks whenever I got close and sometimes when owls or kites flew by. Once when five birds were sitting on a wire a passing little owlet made a playful swoop. With loud kikikik! kikikik! all five almost simultaneously dived from the wire to water level, then settled on the bank.

It became apparent in the course of the week that the kingfishers were using the hole as a roost. This habit has been observed before in Kashmir (Ali & Ripley, Handbook, Vol. 4:72). The birds came back near the hole around 5.40 p.m. They would come in ones and twos when all the six would sit calling, sometimes fluttering over to the hole. The finally one would settle on the hole and disappear in. One by one the others

would follow. But for the cha-ha-ha! cha-ha-ha! cha-ha-ha! of the little owlets things would be quiet again.

A NESTLING WHITE-EYE

Brig. R. Lokaranjan

An unkempt row of odd shrubs and a few tree-trunks rather than the trees themselves, were visible through the window of a room I used to work in except for the branches of a small tree. This one was exciting to observe as I saw its dry twigs suddenly sprout innumerable green leaves in a matter of days. A small forked branch of this tree was selected soon by a pair of White-eyes (Zosterops palpebrosa) to build a nest! My observations and feelings are recounted in this short write-up.

'The whisperable distance' (to quote Lavkumar whose delightful article appeared in the Newsletter of February 1973) and the eye-level view from the room where I was seated, permitted easy and close observation without disturbing the busy pair at their job. So tiny and delicate was the nest that I was at times afraid to look directly lest the birds should abandon it. I couldn't risk such a tragedy happening to me. It was very soon that the nest was occupied, so I knew that the eggs had been laid and were being hatched. I never got the opportunity to see the eggs, because I did not have the heart to disturb the birds, and was satisfied by noting from Dr. Salim Ali's book that: 'Eggs, 2-3, pale blue, sometimes with a cap of deeper blue at the broad end' was all that there was to it. Above all, I did not want to disclose to anyone around about my discovery of the nest, lest the birds be disturbed by other curious observers.

One Monday morning, I was not just surprised, I was most alarmed, to see the sole occupant, a single White-eye chick, featherless, ugly, looking quite conspicuous in the tiny cup-like nest, and with its beak wide open! My taking a look using my x 6 binoculars even though the nest was close by, must have been the reason for the start I got! Using the binoculars had become my routine practice for a really close view during the last few days. I had missed the previous day, a Sunday, so the clear largely enlarged view gave me the start. There was good reason for alarm, for even a casual passer-by, glancing in that direction could not possibly miss the featherless little creature trying to raise its head up, with its beak open and making its presence felt. This was happening every few minutes while the parent birds dutifully kept coming and going, feeding the little one. This seemed to me against all the rules of camouflage and concealment in nature. My anxiety for the safety of the little bird started getting beyond a joke. I found it almost impossible to do my work, in fact anything at all except staying on some sort of caretaker guard-duty. There was my friend the mongoose who lived in the roof of the veranda, a coucal in the vicinity

which kept showing up now and then, and my enemies the jungle crows. A pair of these had taken the young and destroyed a dove's nest, and also a redvented bulbul's nest from a hedge at my residence and I had no time for crows anyway. This little White-eye would be a tasty morsel if it was discovered, which seemed most likely.

In a couple of days or so, the little one's bare body had grown feathers, and the situation changed completely. It was difficult to locate the chick in its nest even with my binoculars! I had to look and see that nobody was around, then venture out to get a straight and close look, to detect a slight movement before locating the little bird. Each time I was even 6 or 7 feet away, it would notice my movement and immediately duck its head. Once down, it would lie so still, so low in its nest, that I could hardly see it! The rapidly growing olive-green feathers merged into the surroundings so perfectly. It was truly amazing now to notice how nature worked; this time it was the last word in camouflage and concealment. Only when one of the parent birds brought food did the chick cautiously emerge to gobble, and retire as soon as it flew away.

It was an exciting, unique experience to see the chick grow up by the hour, more or less. The once featherless little open-beaked horror had at first given me such anxious moments worrying about its safety and then given me the undescribable joy of seeing the fluffy, tiny, greenish yellow little bird, object of my keen attention those few days, hop out of its nest one day and disappear into the wide, wide world with its anxious parents close at hand. That the little one had survived, seemed to me in itself a miracle. I offered up a silent prayer to the good Lord to look after my little love for a day or two more, and then it could perhaps fend for itself! For forty years or so, I had not thought of something I learnt, possibly in the scripture class in a convent as a little boy, but it came to my mind then; the tune also, with the words (which may not be quite correct):

' All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small -
All things wide and wonderful,
the Lord God made them all. '

BIRDS IN A 100 MM RAINFALL ZONE

Bhagwan Dass Rana

This bird survey was undertaken on December 1970 in extreme western portion of the Jaisalmer district of Rajasthan State ($26^{\circ}40'N$. to $28^{\circ}N$ and $69^{\circ}30'E$. to East). The survey areas were Tanot, Kishangargh, Ghotaru, Shahgargh, Mandla and Dhanana. This whole zone is an 'ocean' of loose sand showing undulating topography and it exhibits a variety of sub-habitats although these intermingle with each other. The sand dunes are, at places, above 100 m high. At Dhanana, south west of Jaisalmer, bare concentric sand dunes devoid of vegetation and birdlife were observed.

The vegetation in the region is sparse. Trees are represented by Prosopis cineraria, Salvadora oleoides, Calligonum polygonoides and Haloxylon salicornicum found scattered all through the 100 mm rainfall area. Shrubs like Zizyphus nummularia, Capparis decidua, Calotropis procera and Acacia jacquemontii were also met with at certain localities. The herbaceous cover of the region was composed of Tribulus alatus, Arva pseudotomentosa, Gisekia pharancoides, Depterygium glaucum, Boerhavia diffusa, Indigofera anabaptista; grasses in the region were: Lasiurus indicus, Aristida funiculata, Eleusine compressa, Panicum turgidum, Brachiaria ramosa and Dactyloctenium indicum.

The rainfall in the region averages 82 to 90 mm annually, the rainy days being only from 2.vii to 2.ix (Pramanik & Hariharan, 1952, Proc. Sym. Rajputana Desert. Natl. Inst. Sci., India: 167-78). The mean monthly maximum and minimum temperatures vary annually from $24.8^{\circ}C$ to $45.5^{\circ}C$ and $7.2-29.4^{\circ}C$ respectively.

When we were on our way from Tanot to Ghotaru, we were greeted by the Shikra, Accipiter badius, black vulture, Torgos calvus, Neophron, Neophron percnopterus and the Crested Eagle Spizaetus cirrhatus. No sooner, our vehicle reached at Ghotaru, a group of 5-7 Imperial Sandgrouse, Pterocles orientalis were seen flying in the canopy. The Indian Ring Dove, Streptopelia decaocto, the Yellow-vented Bulbul, Pycnonotus leucogenys, White Wagtail, Motacilla alba and the Orphean Warbler, Sylia hortensis were found to be near a water tank situated nearby Ghotaru Fort. We stayed for two nights there finding them to be regular visitors of the water tank. The Blue Jay, Coracias benghalensis, Rufousbacked Shrike, Lanius schach were relaxing on a telegraphic wire near Ramgargh. At Dhanana and Shahgargh in the dune tops around hutments, inside temporary buildings and old forts the rock pigeon, Columba livia, the House Sparrow, Passer domesticus and the House Crow, Corvus splendens were found. A Green Bee-eater, Merops orientalis was in the treeless tract. A huge number of Crested Larks, Galerida cristata and the Short-toed Lark, Calendrella brachydactylla were seen before dusk, along the running jeep, returning from

Mandla to Dhanana. The Magpie Robin, Copsychus saularis, the Pied Bushchat, Saxicola caprata were found hopping among Haloxylon salicornicum, Calligonum and Salvadora bushes. The Kestrel, Falco tinnunculus was emitting a sharp Ki ki ki sound from a Salvadora tree.

I was much surprised to see the Indian Courser, Cursorius coromandelicus in the interdunal areas of Mandla region and on the bare sand dunes the following birdlife was observed: Red-winged Bush Lark, Mirafra erythroptera, Blackbellied Finch-lark Eremopterix grisea.

Comparing the birds listed with the birdlife of Jawai Dam, Rajasthan, published by me earlier, there is a significant difference owing to the fact that only a few bird species are able to alter rhythm to withstand the winter and summer temperatures of 100 mm rainfall zone.

JOYS OF THE MONSOON

J. S. Serrao

With rainfall at c. 350 mm, with a departure of c. +150 mm from the normal, a walk through the Borivli National Park via Aarey on the morning of 17th June 1973 was very exhilarating and fruitful. The carpet of green was hardly an inch above the ground; the Park teemed with signs of life all around. The Wild Plantain (Musa grandis) and Karvi (Karvia callosa) our two monsoon barometers are there on the schedule. During 1972 monsoon the wild plantain behaved abnormally, having sprouted up in the last week of May - presumably it was an indication of the poor rains we experienced (see 'Notes and Comments', Newsletter for Birdwatchers, Vol. 12(8), August 1972). Karvi was about 6-8 inches high, and the wild plantain about a foot. Among the undergrowth the following appeared to thrive excellently: two species of Crinum (Amaryllidaceae), Curculigo orchoides in flower, Scilla indica with its mauve raceme, Chlorophytum sp. in white flowers, and Gloriosa superba about a foot in length. Curcuma pseudomontana though hardly a 6 inches above the ground was getting into flower all over the Park, and in many instances before the single leaf thrown out has unfurled itself.

The rainless spell following the first outbursts has sent the nullahs dry. Only such nullahs with pools in them, had thin trickles of water. This reflected on the crab fauna of the Park. In the most shady parts alone could be seen the crabs Paratelphusa guerini and/or P. mccani. But Paratelphusa jacquemonti was nowhere to be seen except for a sizeable example crushed under a passing vehicle and left drying in the middle of the road.

The butterfly fauna was negligible. A single Yellow Orange Tip (Ixias pyrene) flitted our way; a pair of Psyche (Leptosia

nina) were engaged in a lively aerial dance, and a single Common Grass Yellow (Terias hecabe) was encountered. Half a dozen or so Common Indian Crow (Euploea core) were busily drumming the leaves of the Sandpaper tree (Streblus asper) and the Koora (Holarrhena antidysenterica), either to test the soundness of the leaf before ovipositing, or in the actual throes of oviposition. A solitary Papilio pelytes female form romulus was diligently searching among the sprouting undergrowth for some aspo-metic plant for laying. No other butterflies were seen though the day happened to be a bright one. As the rain picks up one will be able to see at least 40 of our commonest butterflies without effort.

As regards birds, the Mahratta Woodpecker (Picoides mahrattensis) was present in number never encountered before. Between Culvert 8 and 11, more than a dozen individuals were counted. Every few yards a roadside tree held either a pair or a singleton, and they flew off with a clich-r-r-r-r as they detected us.

At the south end of Culvert 8 an Indian Robin male (Saxicoloides fulicata) was seen carrying something dangling in its beak. We mistook it for food for the young. But on a clear search of the spot where it dived, a half built nest was found in a Calocopteris floribunda stump - a rather belated attempt. The male came repeatedly with loads of building material, but the female was nowhere on the scene. A batch of Baya Weavers (Ploceus philippinus), some of them already in nuptial plumage were chirping on a silk cotton sapling by the side of a rice field, but were soon disturbed by an urchin.

At Culvert 12 could be heard the he-will-beat-you of the Spotted Babbler (Pellorneum ruficeps). From the Valley came the faint whistles of the Idle Schoolboy. As water conditions improve his activities will increase and so his whistling calls.

The White-headed race (blythi) of the Greyheaded Myna (Sturnus malabarica) is with us in Bombay. Numbers were seen freely mixed with the grey-headed bird. A Barred Jungle Owlet (Glaucidium radiatum) perched on an exposed branch in the valley was the object of swearing of a gathering of bulbuls, tailor birds and other tinies. The Black Drongo (Dicrurus adsimilis) in many cases appeared nursing young; one was seen carrying a large insect in its legs. Quite a few of them were seen aggressively darting at passing kites and crows.

Franklin's Wren-Warbler (Prinia hodgsoni = Prinia gracilis of old) whose status around Bombay and Salsette intrigues bird-watchers again imposes itself on our attention. An occasional male pours forth his tinkling chiwee-chiwee-chiwee-chip-chip-chip-chip from an exposed twig of a bush or shrub, while the rest of the group keeps up the chip-chip chorus. And the cross-word-puzzle or what's your trouble of the Indian Cuckoo (Cuculus micropterus) could be heard in the Pongam Valley.

The mirth of the life-giving rains could be noticed in the

behaviour of two pairs of Ashy Swallow-Shrike (Artamus fuscus). A pair each was perched huddled together on two tad palms about 60 ft apart; beaking each other with the abandon of a pair of lovers in the City's Municipal garden. Alternately a pair would take off and hover above and around the other pair. The latter would take off to meet the seeming intruders, and after a bit of chasing the two pairs would return to their respective perches. No malice was evident when individuals of either pair came close together in the chase. Perhaps it was all play set in motion by the salubrient weather.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Last week the Editor had the good fortune of being in Castellabate, one of the most beautiful areas of the Mediterranean coast. A morning's bird outing with Max Nicholson indicated how very shy the birds of Italy are compared to those in our country. Obviously the long history of persecution by netting has left its impress on avians, and perhaps it will be many decades before the effect of the new civilized laws preventing the netting of birds for commercial purposes will have its effect on the psychology of avians.

The only birds which were not too afraid of humans were House Martins. They were nesting in the verandas of buildings and a few of them were engaged in territorial fights for air space. Goldfinches look beautiful with their red faces and prominent golden yellow wing bars. There was a Sardinian Warbler, a Rock Bunting, some Greenfinches, and a Herring Gull; and that was the lot for three days of birdwatching

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Half the year has run out and we have only received subscription from a 150 people. Will the others kindly oblige?

CORRESPONDENCE

Pied Crested Cuckoo and rain

Among the bushes on the bank of a perennial rivulet, I saw three Pied Crested Cuckoos for the first time in the season at c. 8 a.m. on 16.vi.1973. As I was visiting the area regularly every morning it could be assumed fairly safely that the birds most probably had just arrived either the previous evening or night. The first shower of rains fell on the morning of 23.vi, i.e. within a week of the arrival of the Pied Crested Cuckoos.

This observation pertains to a village in Broach district of Gujarat.

Lalsinh M. Raol
Jamnagar

AN APPEAL

BIRDS IN URBAN ENVIRONMENT

Dr Harmut Walter of the University of California, Los Angeles, is interested in studying the worldwide problem of Birds in Urban Environment. While some bird species suffer from the reduction of habitat due to urbanization and become rare, endangered, and eventually extinct, others seem to go readily along with man-changed or man-made habitats and even profit from the changes. Dr Walter is collecting data on urban habitats from different parts of the world in an attempt to analyse the various factors involved on a comparative basis. He has circularized a questionnaire, and bird watchers living within Indian towns (with a population of at least 20,000) and cities, can help in the early stages of his investigation. Select two built-up areas of 10 to 20 hectares in your city, (1) residential, and (2) a business or bazaar quarter. List the 10 most numerous bird species present in each in order of their numerical abundance. If even a rough estimate of their population density can be given, that may be useful.

The information may please be sent to me c/o The Editor, giving your name and address, the town or city and the approximate area and type of urban habitat reported on.

Sálim Ali

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RK BHATNAGAR

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ON THE **SIZE** OF BIRD FLOCKS

Madhav Gadgil

A number of our bird species, roughly one half of our total bird fauna, flock at some time of the year or other. Sizes of such flocks show a tremendous amount of variation. It is commonplace to see a flock of a hundred or more Red Munias on a ripe jowar field in October, and the number of Spanish Sparrows flocking at a winter roost runs into tens of thousands. On the other hand, one seldom sees more than ten Jungle Babblers in a single flock. Redvented Bulbuls come together in flocks only rarely, and even on those rare occasions there are no more than six or eight in a single gathering. Such variation in flock size poses a number of intriguing questions. I will address myself here to one rather specific question, namely the distribution of flock size for a given species - and the species I choose is the Indian or Common Myna; a bird I am very fond of, for as EHA remarks, no bird seems to be more uniformly in good spirits.

But first let me explain what is meant by the distribution of flock size. If you watch the mynas busily feeding during the mid-morning you will occasionally see a solitary bird; most often however you will see them in pairs. You will also see some in threes, fours, fives or sixes. One of my typical counts showed, one solitary, thirteen pairs, two threes, six

fours, two sixes, and one flock of seven. I did not encounter any in fives, nor any in flocks of more than seven. The flock size is obviously not constant; however two is the most frequent size, four the next most frequent and so on. Such information about how frequent the various flock sizes are is termed as the frequency distribution of flock sizes.

Biometricians love such frequency distributions. Any distribution is of course specified by the entire information as presented above. However, we try to describe any distribution by as few numbers as possible. Average flock size is one such number, variance in flock size which is an index of how much the flock sizes depart from the average is another such number. If the distribution is not symmetrical around the average, then skewness, an index of this asymmetry is a third number. We try to find general types of distributions so that given the type and some numbers such as average, we will have a very good idea of what the distribution looks like.

Let us go back to the mid-morning flock size distribution of mynas. Although here the distribution is specified by some eight numbers; we find that a single number is quite adequate to describe the whole distribution once we are told that the distribution belongs to the type named after the mathematician Poisson with the proviso that birds almost always occur as pairs and that flock size of zero is nonsense. One can then only tell that the most frequent flock size is a pair, and the entire distribution can be pretty accurately guessed at by anybody who knows about statistical distributions.

All this may sound silly to a birdwatcher. Why should a birdwatcher care? But there is very good reason why he should care. The reason is that the form of the distribution tells us a lot about how birds behave. For example, a Poisson distribution arises when the chance that a certain event will take place is rather small. In the present context, that event is the coming together of more than one pair. The particular distribution of flock sizes in the mid-morning arises because the birds tend to keep in pairs and only rarely do more than one pair join together. Mid-morning is the busiest time for feeding. The Poisson distribution suggests that foraging in dispersed pairs is the most efficient method of feeding.

This contrasts with the state of affairs in the evening. One of my evening censuses showed that sixes and eights were very common. There were twenty-nine sixes and thirty-seven eights. Fours and tens were less common being twelve and fifteen respectively. There were just two pairs and three flocks of twelve. Odd sized flocks were quite rare - thus there were no fives, and nines, one three, one seven and one eleven. There was only one flock larger than twelve, of size sixteen. This distribution is obviously rather different from the mid-morning one. For one it is more or less symmetrical. In fact, it is the so-called normal distribution. Many living things fit this distribution, for example the weights of all birdwatchers in the Borivli National Park. From the view point of flocks of mynas

this means that coming together of pairs is not at all such a rare event in the evenings as it was in the morning.

These flocks then start on their journey towards their night time roost. If one counts the number of birds in a flock as they fly towards the roost, one discovers that their size distribution has changed markedly. It is no more symmetrical as the earlier normal distribution. The mean flock size may now be twelve, with many flocks of sizes eight, ten, twelve, fourteen and sixteen. However, now the distribution has a long tail. There are occasional flocks of as much as eighty birds. The distribution has thus become markedly asymmetrical. Such a distribution becomes symmetrical just like the normal distribution once again if one plots the sizes on a logarithmic scale. The distribution is therefore known as log-normal.

Log-normal distributions are known in many other contexts. For example, the distribution of income in a population is log-normal. There is a nice explanation of how such a log-normal distribution arises. It is simply a consequence of 'them that has gets'. It occurs in a system in which the rich get richer, and the poor poorer. Now the flocks of mynas flying towards the roost show just such a process. A large flock attracts other birds much more strongly. Hence larger flocks gain members more easily, while smaller flocks lose members more easily. This process converts the normal distribution of the flocks in the evening into a log-normal distribution of flocks flying towards the roost.

I hope that I have shown that looking at the size distribution of flocks may not be quite as silly as it sounds at first. A careful study of the phenomenon does suggest a number of things about the behaviour of bird flocks - about how they change in size and how they come to be of the size they are. The behaviour described here is typical of mynas in January - well after last year's breeding, but before next year's has begun. In May, when breeding is on a different picture emerges. It suggests other things. For example, the size distribution of the flocks flying towards the roost in May suggests that one of the partner spends the night at the nest, while the other one flies to the communal roost. The size distribution of flocks in August, just after breeding again gives much information about the average breeding success as the basic unit of the flock at this time is not just the pair, but the pair with its young. A study of the flock size distribution of any of our many flocking species is bound to produce fresh insights into the natural history of the species. And this brings me to the moral of this essay - that it is very much worthwhile to make careful quantitative studies of any phenomenon we observe. Natural history phase of Indian ornithology is now drawing to a close with the completion of Salim Ali-Ripley's monumental Handbook. We must now move on to more rigorous quantitative aspects.

AVOCETS (RECURVIROSTRA AVOSETTA) AT KANKARIA LAKE, AHMEDABAD

S. R. Amladi

During the course of an official visit to Ahmedabad I had the opportunity to spare the morning of 30th April 1973 for a quick visit to the Zoo and Kankaria Lake in the company of my colleague Dr A. S. Dhattiwala.

As we approached the lake we could make out a rather small flock of waterbirds in one part of the lake close to the zoo. Scanning the area with a 10 x 50 pair of binoculars rewarded us with a superb close-up view of perhaps 40 to 50 avocets swimming in the water. Some of them were seen to 'up end' probably to probe the bottom mud, for it was in a shallow part that the birds were floating. Sparsely sprinkled among this assemblage were a few Shovellers (Anas clypeata) and about a dozen Lesser Whistling Teal (Dendrocygna javanica). Feeding in the mud were near the bank some Black-winged Stilts (Himantopus himantopus) and a few Common Sandpipers (Tringa hypoleucos).

I particularly mention the sighting of the avocets because neither Mr Zafar Futehally (Newsletter, Vol. 12(12): 4-6) nor Mr Sumant R. Shah (ibid., Vol. 13(4): 4-6) mention having seen this species during their extensive itinerary of Ahmedabad and its environs. Obviously the avocets were later arrivals.

Later that day we met Mr Reuben David, Superintendent of the Ahmedabad Zoo, who told us that during his tenure here this was the first time he had seen waterbirds ever come to Kankaria Lake, in flocks of thousands, a circumstance possibly caused by the drought.

It is surprising that the food resources in the Kankaria Lake had been ignored by waterbirds over all these years. If this body of water is favoured by the waterbirds every season in future, one wonders about the ecological effects that might be produced as a consequence of the introduction of a new element (i.e. hordes of waterbirds) in the biological environment of Kankaria Lake. If the lake is presumed to have been in a state of biotic equilibrium till now, its seasonal encroachment by so many avian predators, feeding on the small plant and animal life, would not be without any effect on the equilibrium. This is a problem that merits attention and study by naturalists residing in the area.

ON A BOOST OF THE WHITEHEADED (BLYTH'S) MYNA (STURNUS MALABARICUS BLYTHII)

K. K. Neelakantan

Work connected with the State Wildlife Board took me to Peechi Dam, 20 km from Trichur (Kerala State), and I had to spend two nights at Peechi House (31.v and 1.vi.1973). A slight indisposi-

tion gave me an opportunity to watch a large gathering of White-headed Mynas going to roost, and dispersing the next morning.

On the 31st evening, at 17.30 hrs we (Mr Mukundan, Deputy Conservator of Forests, and I) noted a flock of some 50 White-headed Mynas resting on a leafless tree in the jungle close to the dam and only about 2 or 3 furlongs from Peechi House. They were indulging in an endless, low chattering. From time to time flocks of the same species, coming from different parts of the neighbouring forest, joined them. By 18.00 hrs the entire gathering of some 500 birds had flown to two or three tall casuarina trees standing in front of Peechi House. Here they remained for nearly half an hour, producing a monotonous, harsh, deafening chatter. Small flocks of mynas from all points of the compass kept coming in and jostling for places on the already overcrowded branches. Continuously, the birds played a sort of musical chairs as some would suddenly hop away, fly up, circle the tree, and come back again, only to find their original perches usurped by others. To describe the excitement and the noise is just impossible. At 18.20 hrs 99% of the assembled birds left the casuarinas suddenly and flew swiftly, down, apparently, to a clump of low, graft-mango trees standing close to the casuarinas. I assumed that they had all gone to roost in these thickly foliated, dwarfish mango trees which covered the ground like so many igloos or huge green baskets. Soon, the few remaining mynas also took the same route and disappeared.

The next morning at 6.00 the Whiteheaded Mynas had already left the roost and were sitting close-packed on the casuarinas, chattering very loudly and excitedly. The one sound they all repeated over and over again was kreech-kreech-kreech. At 6.05 almost all the birds suddenly exploded from the casuarinas in two flocks. But they did not go far; veering sharply after flying no more than 50 yards, they rushed back to the casuarinas and chattered with renewed vigour and in greater frenzy. Meanwhile small groups of 25-50 birds kept flying in to join the main assembly, mostly from the west. After a while, in ones and twos, some flew off to the east (towards the forest and the hills). At 6.10 most of the birds left as one large flock. A few, however, remained on the casuarinas. Also some 25 to 30 birds from the main flock flew back and again began chattering. Long before the Whiteheaded Mynas had left the casuarinas, Common and Jungle mynas (comparatively very few) had started their day and were busy feeding. At 6.14 there was a large influx of Whiteheaded Mynas from the southwest, but, after spending a few moments on the casuarinas, half of these flew off to the east. After that there were frequent departures involving only small numbers; and it was only at 6.21 that a second large flock shot off into the forest. At 6.25 there were still enough mynas left on the casuarinas to make their presence felt by their chattering. I was not able to watch the last of them leaving the place.

During the day (i.e. between about 7.00 and 16.40 hrs) not a single Whiteheaded Myna was to be seen anywhere around the dam.

or in the neighbouring forest patches. But the few Jungle and Common Mynas remained all day. That evening, at 16.40 hrs a Whiteheaded Myna was noted flying northeast to southwest past Peechi House. Though I frequently took a look at the leafless tree east of the dam where the mynas had first been noted the previous day at 17.30 hrs, till 17.45 no mynas were found there that day! Between 17.45 and 18.15 I was otherwise occupied, but my friend and I managed to get out just in time to occupy a better vantage point than that of the previous day. From there we noted that the mynas swooped down almost en masse and flew low over the graft mango trees in front of Peechi House, making for a couple of taller, equally bushy (though only above a height of 10-12 feet) mango trees standing one on either side of the major junction of roads, some 200 yards from the casuarinas. These trees were c. 30 feet tall and stood very close to a street lamp (bulb-and-shade type). We found that the Whiteheaded Mynas were joined by some 30 Common (and/or Jungle) Mynas. At 19.30 hrs the Whiteheaded Mynas were still chattering from their roost; but after 19.00 hrs the voices of the 'black' mynas (till then drowned by the roar of their numerous though less vociferous kinsfolk) became more evident. At 21.15 hrs we examined the roost-trees by the beam of a 5-cell torch and were able to see only a very small number (not more than 5, and all Whiteheaded) which were on the top-most twigs and had no 'cover' just below their perches. There were no birds at all on the bare portions of the branches and twigs anywhere on the two trees.

A few 'observations' that occurred to me are given below:

- (1) The Whiteheaded Mynas of this place spent the day foraging in the forest and avoided the inhabited area; yet, to roost, they came from all over the forest to the brightly lit and noisy township.
- (2) Even there they preferred a couple of trees standing on either side of the road and closest to a street lamp. Did the presence of the lamp and the proximity of human habitations guarantee better protection than trees standing in the forest?
- (3) From what little we could see of the birds actually seen asleep, we were led to conclude that all of them hid themselves in thick leaf-clusters, though quite a few appeared to be on perches where they would be vulnerable to attack from above. In fact we felt that most of the birds were on branches close to the periphery of the leaf-canopy and concluded (hypothetically) that they stood a better chance of escaping if they could fly up and off as soon as there was some serious threat. Our movements, and voices as well as the powerful beam playing on the branches and leaves weren't threat enough even to make them fly. The only reaction from the birds was a little movement and a low chatter which subsided as soon as we had moved off.
- (4) Elsewhere in the area there were large mango and other thick-folaged trees close to bright, fluorescent lamps. These

lamps, however, appeared to be switched off round about midnight whereas the bulb-type street lamps burnt throughout the night. Did this fact have a bearing on the mynas' choice of roosts? (5) Lastly, according to Dr Salim Ali's Birds of Kerala the Whiteheaded Myna breeds in February, March and April; and I have seen occupied nests with young being fed in the nest in April and early May at Periyar. Yet at Peechi on the 31st of May and the 1st of June I did not find any striking differences in plumage among the birds seen there. Could this particular flock have been composed entirely of adults? - or, perhaps, even of males alone? Unfortunately, these questions did not occur to me when I had a chance of examining the flock more closely!

BIRDLIFE IN GUJARAT

K. S. Lavkumar

This academic year finds me working at the small town of Dhoraji some 14 miles north of Junagadh. Girner is a wonderful sight from here. The entire countryside is intensively cultivated and there are plenty of fine trees, all the commoner ones and quite a few of them are very gracious banyans shading roads and wells. A few large, gnarled acacias (babools) are also surviving though like their kind in other parts of Saurashtra they will soon disappear.

Birdlife is particularly plentiful and the babools and the larger trees ensure a sizeable population of Yellowfronted Pied Woodpeckers and Brahminy Mynas. I have also heard many Red Turtle-Doves though strangely not seen any. The Plain Longtailed Warbler is equally common with the Ashy Longtailed, though normally the two are attached to different habitats. Redvented Bulbuls are far less common than I expect, I wonder why. A Sunday amble in the countryside brought us to a small colony of 50 pairs of Cliff Swallows under one of the arches of the railway bridge across the river Bhadar. I have only once seen a colony of this swallow in Saurashtra. On the same walk we saw a Common Sandpiper and two Green Sandpipers on the stagnant river pools - the drought effect is still apparent everywhere. These are our first migrants and at night I have heard some waders go over. Grey Partridge and Painted Partridge are both quite common among the crops and the hedgerows are inhabited by more than a fair share of coucals. On several occasions I saw Blackwinged Kites and once a Redheaded Merlin. Then there are quite a few Rain Quail and fewer Rock Bush Quail mostly heard of course. Redwinged Bush Larks, Common Babblers and Large Grey Babblers occupy the eroded wastelands with odd pairs of Indian Robins and Grey Shrikes. Black Drongos, Koels and Crimsonbreasted Barbets patronise the avenue trees and Black Drongos and Redwattled Lapwings are plentiful among the ploughed fields. At the river a pair of Pied Wagtails were seen, their song was very like that of the Magpie Robin, which is unaccountably missing.

This is just a crosssection of the birdlife casually noted but does show that I am in an interesting country.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

I see that Salim Ali and Mr J. T. M. Gibson reflect the views of the majority of our readers, who want light and enjoyable reading in the Newsletter, and are not particularly anxious to ensure that it contains articles which break new ground in ornithology. For such serious work there are many avenues including the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society.

However, to write easily and with authority is not an easy task and only someone who is a meticulous observer like for example Neelakantan, Stewart Melliush, Stairmand or Lavkumar achieve this distinction. The editor hopes that the Newsletter will continue to receive articles which are pleasant reading in the first instance because this is the only way one can encourage a wide section of our people to start looking at birds, and taking an intelligent interest in them. Attractive descriptions of our avians is what we are looking for. The Newsletter will not object graphs, figures, ratios and suchlike paraphernalia but they must be presented in an attractive packing.

CORRESPONDENCE

Newsletter for Birdwatchers

I have read Shri Ghorpade's critique (Newsletter 13(8) - August 1973) with interest, and up to a point am even tempted to echo some of his remarks. For example I also feel there is often a great deal of extraneous 'padding' in published articles which detracts from their merit rather than otherwise. Some of the notes published 'in the raw' - just as received from the writer - could be made more meaningful by a little judicious editing and the addition of appropriate amplifying comments. Topping the list of names on the Editorial Board I must accept some of the blame for the shortcomings myself. However, by and large I think our Executive Editor deserves high praise for keeping the Newsletter going unbrokenly all these 12 or 13 years, almost single handed and largely out of his own pocket, with such admirable effect. It has served to bring together an ever widening circle of enthusiastic bird watchers all over the country, introduce them to one another, and spread general interest in the hobby in a way that nothing else had done before. Actually this was the initial idea behind starting the Newsletter; it was never intended to masquerade as a journal of scientific ornithology. Some of us had long realized that the science could not prosper and develop in India unless and until a sufficiently large body of competent amateur birdwatchers was built up. Thus Shri Ghorpade's premise that the Newsletter was meant to be

a 'responsible medium for ornithological work carried out in this country' is not wholly correct. It was, and is, primarily intended as a medium for popularizing birdwatching as a pleasurable hobby as the first step leading to scientific ornithology. It did not presume to be on a par, for example, with Pavo which was aimed at the more serious scientific worker - one who had already advanced beyond the stage of birdwatching merely as an intelligent hobby. The Newsletter has never consciously aspired at 'finding acceptance in higher ornithological circles' though it may surprise Shri Ghorpade to know how much appreciated the paper is in 'higher scientific circles' nevertheless - not so much for its scientific content but as a laudable first step towards scientific ornithology by first arousing a popular interest in birds.

With regard to the criticism in the last para on p. 2 about 'lengthy discourses of birdwatching exploits' ending with a skimpy list of the birds seen: the usefulness or otherwise of such 'discourses' is a matter of opinion. Conceding that the articles are sometimes needlessly wordy, and at times even 'flowery' (plastic flowers!) I personally - and doubtless some other readers as well - prefer to have this sort of narrative background if interestingly written, rather than a bare enumeration of the birds seen. Without a picture of the ecological setting a mere list of birds seems to me dull, flat and unprofitable! The editorial policy for a publication like the Newsletter should, in my opinion, be to encourage terse readable articles which are evocative of an urge in the reader to visit interesting birdy places and add to his own store of experiences. I feel that in the present stage of bird study in India the foremost aim and function of the Newsletter should be to continue to popularize and spread the cult of pleasurable birdwatching as an intelligent outdoor hobby. Only after the cult becomes widely diffused in the country can we expect a body of competent amateurs capable of contributing something of real scientific worth. In the earlier stages, moreover, I feel that there is a distinct advantage in working in small groups rather than individually as advocated by Shri Ghorpade. This, especially if there are some among the groups who are relatively experienced and knowledgeable and can provide guidance to beginners and transmit the infection, as it were. It enables observations to be compared and discussed, and identifications checked on the spot.

It seems idle at this stage to talk of converting the Newsletter into a 'worthy successor' to Hume's Stray Feathers though this could stand as our ideal for the future. It must be remembered that Hume's correspondents were persons who had grown up in the British natural history tradition and were already familiar with their own birds, even if only as egg-collectors, before they came out to India. With the unbounded opportunities available here, and under the masterly tutelage, guidance and coordination of an ornithological giant like Hume many of them soon blossomed into seasoned ornithologists.

Schoolboy egg-collecting and nature study, not to speak of scientific ornithology, has been practically non-existent among Indians. It is only during the last 25 years or so that a glimmer of popular interest in birdwatching has become discernible, and we have still a long way to go. For the handful of the more serious workers, the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society and other scientific journals are already available as publication media. What is more urgently needed at the moment than a full-fledged journal of ornithology is something that will cater for and help to foster a much wider circle of keen amateur birdwatchers some of whom may hopefully assume the role of Hume's correspondents in course of time. This, in effect, is what the Newsletter is and has been trying to achieve. I would repeat that what we need most today is to popularize by every available means the intelligent field study of birds so that we may ultimately produce a band of competent amateurs capable of adding to scientific knowledge: we must learn to walk before we can run!

Salim Ali

I feel that K. D. Ghorpade expects more (or perhaps less) of the Newsletter than the majority of its readers who, I suspect, are amateurs like myself. If, as I suppose, there are fewer exact and scientific ornithologists than people like me, who have neither the time nor scholarship to worry overmuch with latin names and that sort of precision, but who enjoy seeing and listening to birds and reading of other peoples experiences, then the Newsletter will have fewer articles aimed purely at the advancement of science, and more articles describing the pleasures and fascinations of birdwatching. By all means publish more purely scientific articles (these could be marked with an asterisk as a warning), but please do not do away with the more informal, chatty accounts that are so much enjoyed by birdwatchers like me who would fail, without shame, a past course in ornithology.

J. T. M. Gibson
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Newsletter for Birdwatchers

VOL XIII NO. 10 OCTOBER 1973



NEWSLETTER FOR
BIRDPWATCHERS

Volume 13, Number 10

October 1973

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AND ALL BECAUSE OF THE FALL OF A TREE

A. Navarro, S.J.

Within the compound of the Court of Small Causes facing the main entrance of St Xavier's High School, on Lokmanya Tilak Marg, there is a jakfruit tree that for many years has been the roosting resort for a large colony of House Sparrows. In the morning when there is not much traffic along the street, at about sunrise, the chorus of uniform chit chit of hundreds of sparrows calling together was so loud and at times so insistent, that it could not be ignored by the whole of the neighbourhood.

During the last monsoon, after a heavy shower one night, a large old mahogany tree by the side of one of the school gates fell stretched across the road. In the opinion of the Professor of Botany of St Xavier's College, Prof. P. V. Bole, the tree must have been nearly a hundred years old.

A few days after this incident, the whole neighbourhood noticed that the sparrows were no longer roosting at their favourite jakfruit tree. This fact struck my attention too. Since then I am trying to find the connection between the fall of the mahogany tree and the silence on the part of the birds, and the roosting spot where the birds have had their habitat for more than twenty five years.

I did notice however that with the fall of the mahogany

tree a large gap was opened between the school building and the Elphinstone School building; the gap is really much larger than may appear from the street. I have come to the conclusion, since, that the old mahogany tree was shielding and protecting the sparrow colony from the inclements of the weather and the danger of night raptors. My final conclusion is that the sparrows were associating the mahogany tree as a part of their protective association.

Later, on further observation I found a new roosting resort, not far from the old one. Watching from one of the windows of the school building, I saw at c. 6.30 p.m. an almost unbroken stream of sparrows flying through the gap opened up by the fallen mahogany, their flight being very low, just over the top of the Elphinstone School building and alighting into the Elphinstone garden. With this observation it was not difficult to locate the roosting resort; another jakfruit tree, almost touching the building, to the right of the sumptuous steps leading to the main entrance of the Elphinstone School. The tree is well concealed by a barrier of banyan tree and other varieties of garden trees. On my way back to the school, I stopped for a while to have a look at the old jakfruit tree. I saw how some of the sparrows on their way to the new resort were resting for a short while at the old spot and suddenly the whole group would make a dash for the new roosting spot; the same procedure took place in the morning, as the sparrows were leaving the Elphinstone garden. They were alighting for a short spell on the old jakfruit tree, as if to use this as a base to go on and off from their newly selected roosting resort. In fact they were forming large groups; suddenly these groups would disperse, each individual flying to its own feeding ground for the rest of the day.

There is a great similarity between the roosting resorts; both trees are of the medium size, with heavy foliage and well protected and concealed by other trees.

I would not like to finish this note without pointing out that all this has happened because of the fall of a tree. We have also to bear in mind that sparrows, by nature, are sociable birds and are always found associated with the haunts of man. We know very well that sparrows are to be seen in large and noisy towns as well as in small, quiet villages.

What happens to the forest birds which are shy and do not easily adapt themselves to sudden changes of environment, when large forest areas are being cleared out and not being reforested any more? Certainly a lot of harm is being done to the birds as these changes make life impossible for them. Besides we unbalance nature in such a way that the more the forests are being cleared out, the less is the annual rainfall!

AND ALL BECAUSE OF THE FALL OF A TREE!!!

WHITEBROWED BULBUL PYCNONOTUS LUTEOLUS IN BOMBAY CITY

S. R. Amladi

The wooded environs of Raj Bhavan, Bombay, especially the forested part sloping eastwards towards the sea from behind the buildings on Walkeshwar Road, is perhaps one of the last remnants of the forests that once covered the islands of Bombay. Tall trees of Terminalia bellerica, Pithecelobium saman, Streblus asper, Thespesia populnea and some species of Ficus, many of them entwined by lianas, line the lower road which runs through this patch of forest contouring the seashore. The lower road is not accessible to the public, and it is probably this isolation and protection which has helped to retain at least a vestige of the primeval beauty of the area. Once in this 'half-acre of Nature' the only thing that reminds one that one is in the Bombay City is the sight of skyscrapers across the bay. The shrub Lantana camara is the chief ground cover on the upper slopes.

On the evening of 7th April 1973 I had the occasion to visit this place in the company of Mr J. C. Daniel, Curator, Bombay Natural History Society. While walking along the road (I was some distance behind Mr Daniel) I saw a small bird about the size of a bulbul with a dirty greenish brown plumage, a paler belly, light lemon yellow vent and a white stripe above the eye on the brow. I immediately recognized it as the Whitebrowed Bulbul Pycnonotus luteolus. The bird was not alarmed at my presence and I could approach it c. 20 feet or so from its perch in the shrubbery. It flew off as I went closer, and when I caught up with Mr Daniel we heard a burst of bubbling song from the bulbul.

On a subsequent visit to the area on 13th April 1973, I was lucky to be able to see the bird again and watch it closely with a pair of binoculars.

Dr Salim Ali and Humayun Abdulali have stated ('The birds of Bombay and Salsette', J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc. 37(1):102-103; Dec. 1939) that the bird is 'common in the gardens of the outlying residential portions of the city and suburbs'. The same authors go on to say that the bird has been noted at Warden Road, Cumballa Hill, Phirozeshah Mehta Gardens and the Government House grounds, Malabar Hill, Haffkine Institute grounds (Parel), Khar, Andheri, Trombay Hills, Chembur, Borivli, Kandivli and elsewhere in the Salsette. On page 103 they state 'we have no recent information as to whether these birds still persist, but thanks to the presence of many suitable gardens and compounds in that neighbourhood, they are very probably still there' - this has been written referring to a pair seen on Malabar Hill in July 1925.

During the Bird Census organized by the Bombay Natural History Society a number of times this year some of us did encoun-

ter the Whitebrowed Bulbul in the Borivli National Park. It would be of interest to know whether our members residing in the areas mentioned above have seen the bird in their immediate environs or near by. If the information obtained from all members is pooled together it would give one a fair idea of the present status of the bird in the Bombay City, particularly because of the rapid rate at which concrete and cement is replacing the gardens and compounds.

BIRDS SEEN AT BANDIPUR, KARNATAKA

Shailesh Zaveri, Jyotindra Zaveri & Ameet Zaveri

Last summer we visited five South Indian wildlife sanctuaries. The one that we liked most was Bandipur in Karnataka (Mysore State). There we had a very interesting time, watching mammals and birds during a five days' stay from 15.v.1973 to 19.v.73. About 50 different species of birds - not a bad record for rank amateurs like us - were seen. On the first day, we met Mr Neginhal, Assistant Conservator of Forests, Karnataka. He, himself an avid birdwatcher, showed us a fig tree near the Forest lodges, which attracted lots of birds. In just half an hour we saw ten different species visit it. There were three species of bulbuls: Redvented, Redwhiskered and Whitechecked. A Velvetfronted Nuthatch (Sitta frontalis) was working diligently on the bark, one to be disturbed when we arrived on the scene. There were two species of barbets: Crimsonbreasted and Large Green, and a female Pygmy Woodpecker (Picoides nanus). Jungle- and Common Mynas were there in plenty. The Tailor Bird was the last to come as we left. With such a grand start we saw many other species of birds which we had never met before.

One evening we were sitting quietly by a jungle pool, when a pair of Tawny Eagles (Aquila rapax) suddenly flew overhead. They circled about lazily but gracefully for some time before flying on to some other hunting grounds. A little later a pair of Grey Hornbills (Tockus birostris) flew up and alighted on a branch right overhead. Their presence was felt more by their loud calls rather than sight. Soon they also made off. Somewhere behind us a Lapwing (Vanellus indicus) had detected our presence and was proclaiming the fact to the whole jungle, so that no animals were seen later on. This lapwing continued its Did-he-do-it? even after dark. When we went for jeep rides to see animals, we almost always saw peafowl (Pavo cristatus) and Goldenbacked Woodpeckers (Dinopium benghalense). Sometimes in some small glade, Grey Junglefowl (Gallus sonneratii) would be feeding beside the peafowl. The quails we saw were very fearless. They would be searching for food along the paths as our jeep approached. All they would do was to shift about 2 ft to one side and allow us to pass. They would take to flight only when we had almost passed them. Once we saw a Short-toed

Eagle (Circus gallicus) swoop down and alight on a tree branch. Whitebrowed Fantail Flycatchers (Rhipidura aureola) were very common, making spirited sallies after flying insects. On a walk in the jungle after the rains, we came upon two small birds creeping slowly up the bark of a tree like little clock-work toys. Their plumage was ruffled by the rain. They turned out to be Chestnutbellied Nuthatches (Sitta castanea). They let us approach very close. This was in a fairly clear area. Later on, in the forest, we saw lorikeets and the Blue-winged Parakeets (Psittacula columboides). A Pied Crested Cuckoo (Clamator jacobinus) was seen hopping along the ground. Flocks of Whiteheaded Babblers (Turdoides affinis) were moving about from bush to bush. Various other common birds were also sighted. The Jungle Myna (Acridotheres fuscus) was very often seen in attendance with elephants (even tuskers), gaur and cheetal - sitting on the backs of the former two, but hopping around the last.

We also saw a few other birds which we could not identify owing to our scanty knowledge, though we did our best with the help of The Book of Indian Birds and Birds of Travancore & Cochin, by Salim Ali. Anyway, it was a memorable stay and the credit for it goes to Mr Neginhal for the introduction to the birds, and to the birds themselves for their cooperation in letting us see them.

BIRDS OF THE INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, KANPUR

Sudhir Vyas

I joined the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, three years ago. The first bird sight at the Institute, I remember, was a pair of Sarus Cranes which flew past the Library building as the rattling 'tempo' bumped into the campus. Since then three years and an open eye for birds in the campus has yielded a checklist of about 170 species.

The academic year begins in August with the wit-wit of the Rain Quail everywhere. By end of August, the grass in the wide campus grows tall, very tall in the water-logged depressions that lie scattered about. In these places I have seen some very interesting species - Bronzewinged Jacanas, Painted Snipe, Ruddy Crake, Red Munias and a mixed group of Blackheaded Munias. (Two of the chestnutbellied type and four whitebellied among the munias stayed here throughout the last monsoon.) Neither of them is supposed to be here, near Kanpur. I presume they were escaped cage birds.

The same grass holds nests of the Blackthroated and Striated Weavers - both 'firsts' for me, though later I have seen the Blackthroated near Lucknow too.

Two years ago, also in August, I saw, what I am sure, was the Kashmir Roller. It was dusk, but the underparts of the bird

seemed uniformly greyish (hardly blue). In flight, the pale grey wings had a wide black hind border. If it was a Kashmir Roller, wasn't it far out of course?

Amongst those little marshes a pair of Saras are generally present, and if you wake up early enough you can hear them 'krooning' in the distance. A pair of Whitenecked Storks are also often around. I once saw a tiny crane, as big as a Greyheaded Myna, scuttling into the reeds. I suppose it was a crane, unless it was a young waterhen out of the nest or something else.

On the top of our Faculty building resides a Great Horned Owl. I have seen only one, but I hope there is another nearby. There are plenty of nooks and corners and angles in that building (modern sculpture etc.) and the owl must be quite comfortable really. In the evenings it comes out and perches on a ledge and hoots away. Sometimes it remains out in the daytime and this is a heaven-sent opportunity to admire its lovely patterned plumage closely. The little Spotted Owlet and the Jungle Owlet are both found and often heard and sometimes one hears the hissing of the Barn Owl, which were so common at Pooha. Nightjars are also common and once I walked into a group of 6 or 7 birds roosting together. I did not know they slept in these loose gatherings. This was in winter 1971.

As winter comes, the grass dries up and is cut by the villagers, but it is not cropped right out of existence by cattle. The Rain Quail vanish, only the Bush Quails, Bustard Quails and the Grey Partridges remain. An occasional peacock turns up. Through January 1971 an Orangeheaded Ground Thrush stuck around in our very well-wooded nursery and in February 1972 a thrush appeared. I think it was a female Tickell's Thrush (Turdus unicolor).

IIT (K) seems to lie in some sort of a migratory pathway as every November formations of cranes fly over. I remember how a particularly large congregation brought a number of students out of their rooms to look skyward. They were quite impressed. Other occasional winter visitors are some typical cuckoos, probably the Common Cuckoo.

Some of the rarer and more interesting birds that I have seen here are the Crested Bunting (resident), Sirkeer Cuckoo, Verditer- and Greyheaded Flycatchers (winter), Orphean Warbler, Alpine Swift! (There are no 'Alps' for a hundred and fifty miles radius.) Three species that I would never have dreamt of seeing here are the Striolated Bunting, Whitechecked Bulbul and the Blacknaped Monarch Flycatcher. Unfortunately, Paradise- and Fantail Flycatchers are only rare stragglers. One pair, the only one that I have seen here of Tickell's Blue Flycatcher is resident in our nursery. The male sings every summer, but I have never located its nest or newly flown young.

As regards birds of prey, kites are for once not common. Shikras are. A Kestrel usually hangs about the Library and Faculty buildings every winter. An occasional Lager Falcon or Redheaded Merlin turns up, the last always in pairs. Honey Buzzards are resident. Rarely one gets to a Short-toed- or a Booted Eagle. Once I saw a Marsh Harrier, a male. It is the most beautiful hawk I have ever seen. And, of course, there was our pair of King Vultures which had a nest just outside the campus two years ago.

In the winter of 1971 (February) I saw a plover that I could not identify. It was quite larger - larger than a Redwattled Lapwing; orange beak and eye rims, body brown, legs orange. The wings had bold black and white patches. It was quite shy and ran about ploughed fields near a semi-dry pond.

Birds at IIT provide lighter moments too. A group of eucalyptus trees just outside our hostel was particularly fancied by a group of jungle crows as a perch and a roost. So they took the opportunity every early morning to insist on letting out hoarse kraws. And one often had the hilarious delight of seeing a sleepy face appear at a window emitting impotent shoos at the brilliant crows! And there was also a smart group of mangy rhesus monkeys which had a bath in the tank from which drinking water is being drawn, and got the entire hostel down with gastro-enteritis! With examinations postponed for a week it was all part of the fun.

A BRIEF OBSERVATION REGARDING THE MIGRATION OF HOOPES,
UPUPA EPOPS (LINN.) IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

J. R. Dhanze

On 27th February 1973, I had a chance to visit the low altitude area of Himachal Pradesh, i.e. Kunihar and Arki tahsil with Dr R. Bielawski, Zoologist, from the Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland. He came to India with a special problem with regard to some species of Coleoptera (Beetles) in India. On our backward journey to the Headquarters after doing the needful collection I observed a pair of hoopoe feeding on some insects in the bed of wheat at Kunihar, which is a small town at an altitude of 3000 feet.

In the 1st week of March 1973 three pairs of hoopoes were seen in the vicinity of my own house near Govt Degree College, Solan at 4500 ft. These birds were fighting with each other producing all the while a peculiar hud-hud-hud. I observed the fighting of those beautiful birds for a long time as they happened to be new entrants in the vicinity. Most probably they were struggling for their food and stay.

On 16.iii, my Officer-in-Charge, Shri K.K. Mahajan proceeded on a General Faunistic and a special collection of birds and mammals for establishing the Natural History Study Museum. So I had another chance of visiting the high altitude area of Chamba District. Till March 29th I did not observe any hoopoes but on 30.iii when we reached Gharola, a small village on the southeastern bank of the River Ravi, at 7000 ft, a single specimen was seen on the twig of an oak. It was collected and was found to be fully infected by some skin disease.

The following day another single bird was seen. A local guard accompanying me stated that he had seen the hoopoe after c. 7 months in that vicinity, further adding that they inhabit the locality from middle of March to August, and after that they migrated themselves from the locality.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Nature Calendar for 1974

The Bombay Natural History Society issues every year a desk calendar (24.1 x 17.8 cm) printed in four colours and illustrated with twelve beautiful nature photographs in colour by well-known photographers. The 1974 calendar is priced Rs5/- per copy, postage and packing extra. Persons interested in buying them, please contact

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CORRESPONDENCE

Size of Bird Flocks

Madhav Gadgil in his article (Newsletter, 13(9), Sept. 1973) very rightly stresses the importance of studying the quantitative aspect of biological phenomena. It is of interest to inquire about the size of the largest flocks of birds recorded. Unfortunately, naturalists have usually been satisfied with vague descriptions, such as small, medium, large or huge. The size of the rookeries of seafowl is restricted by the availability and size of the rocky coast, etc., whereas there are no such restrictions regarding land birds. Now, fortunately, accurate data with regard to the North American Passenger Pigeon are on record, thanks to the ornithologist, Alexander Wilson. Wilson recorded the size of flocks of Ectopistes migratorius: One passed over him in 1810, containing more than two billion birds. They nested in vast stretches

1791 1000300

of oak and beech forest, where every tree had at least one, sometimes hundreds of nests. The last great nestings were observed in Wisconsin in the year 1878 and covered about 850 sq. miles. They numbered an estimated 136 million birds. This species was mercilessly shot down and the carcasses shipped to market by the freight carload and so decimated that it could not recover. The last wild nesting was recorded near Minneapolis in 1895. The last Passenger Pigeon died in a Cincinnati zoo in 1914.

Amin Tyabji
The Somerset Place
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Newsletter for Birdwatchers

I have read with interest the comments of Dr Salim Ali and 'Jack' Gibson. I would particularly like to support Dr Salim Ali's statement that the Newsletter should be used as a medium for popularising birdwatching as a pleasurable hobby. In this context, I may mention that some years ago I had suggested that a list of subscribers of the Newsletter be made available to all the other subscribers as it provides a ready reference to birdwatchers in different areas of the country. In Delhi, since Mrs Ganguli's death and since Peter Jackson left for Geneva, it has not been possible for me to find a single person, who could help me or whom I could accompany on field trips. I am sure there are many birdwatchers in Delhi, but I have no means of finding them out.

A. Mangalik
Associate Professor of Medicine
All India Inst. of Medical Sciences
New Delhi

Newsletter and Birdwatching

I fully agree with what Dr Salim Ali and Mr Gibson have written in the September 1973 Newsletter. I am a member of the Newsletter right from its inception and have enjoyed reading the experiences of other birdwatchers.

I have always enjoyed birdwatching and it has become a pleasurable hobby for me. I am working at an office at Worli, Bombay, and take my lunch on the office terrace. Because of a few banyan and peepal trees around our building, there is a sizeable number of crows and a few of them are always there when I take my lunch. I enjoy their company and so I throw bits of bread. In the beginning they were very shy, but when they know that I am not going to harm them, they come quite near me to

pick up the bread pieces. Some of them have become very pampered and expect me to throw the pieces exactly where they sit on the terrace door.

Among all these crows, I have observed one with a deformed beak. The beak is crossed and the crow finds it very difficult to pick up the bread pieces I throw at him. In the meantime other crows snatch away the bread pieces. Once or twice I was able to feed it when the other crows were not around. But still he has not gained enough confidence to come near me. The last time I saw him, he had also damaged one of his legs and was finding it difficult to hop along. I have not seen him for the last one month and wonder if he is still alive. I wish I had a good camera to snap him. Have any of our readers seen a crow with a similar deformity?

I am anxiously awaiting the arrival of the swallows and a pair of Large Pied Wagtails. The latter come on the terrace every afternoon when they are in our midst, and I enjoy their presence.

B. A. Palkhiwalla
Dadar, Bombay

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R.K. BHATNAGAR.

Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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THE EDITOR DEPARTS

Zafar Futehally

The Editor is shifting his residence to Bangalore from November and though he will continue to be in close touch with Bombay and with the Newsletter, for reasons of practical convenience it is necessary to entrust the editing and publishing to a permanent resident of Bombay. It is fortunate that S.V. Nilakanta, with whom all readers of the Newsletter are familiar, has agreed to undertake this responsibility. He could only do so, of course, because of the willing assistance of J. S. Serrao who has been such a help to the Newsletter all these years.

The first issue of the Newsletter was brought out in December 1960 and it might interest readers to be reminded of the comments made by some of the people to whom the Editor wrote enquiring whether such a venture would be worth while and what form it should take:

" I do not think the time is ripe yet for forming such a Society I would suggest forming local ornithological clubs. "

" The remarks about the three rather languishing zoological institutions is quite true ... How can we be sure that politics will not invade our Society also. Under the circumstances, don't you think it would be advisable to explore thoroughly the suggestion about regional clubs? "

" The draft is excellent ... this may be published in all the leading newspapers and sent to Registrars of Universities and Colleges and individuals whom we know. "

" Needless to say I am all for the Society to be formed and I am sure if such a Society were in existence, interest in birds would spread rapidly ... For the outset I would say we restrict ourselves to publishing a regular journal once a year, with contributions from Indian ornithologists as well as from foreigners ... I wish you all luck in the venture and am eagerly awaiting further developments. "

" I wish to inform you of my fullest sympathy and support for the proposal. It is indeed high time such a Society is organised. "

" While I agree that a large amount of work has to be done which would warrant the establishment of a Society to foster and look after these interests, I do not think that we have people sufficiently interested to be able to count upon their co-operation for working a new organisation. "

" I think it is an excellent idea to have an Indian Ornithological Society. I spoke to some friends and they are very enthusiastic about the idea ... It would not be difficult to get one hundred members from all over India ... It should be possible to get recurring grant from the Ministry of Scientific and Cultural Affairs for publishing the magazine. "

" I assure you of my full support, however limited it is, in the formation and working of this new Society. "

" It will be difficult to form regional clubs because of the shortage of competent regional pivots. The best thing would be to start a bulletin on the most modest lines and watch the results after a few issues are out. "

I think it is now safe to assume that having survived for thirteen years the Newsletter has crossed the dangerous period when so many new-born publications collapse within a few months of seeing the light of day. There is undoubtedly considerable scope for improvement, and in striking the right balance between serious contributions to ornithology, and arousing popular interest in birds. The outgoing editor feels certain that Mr S. V. Nilakanta will fill the bill excellently.

BROWN WOOD OWL (STRIX LEPTOGRAMICA INDRANEE) IN THE NILGIRIS,
SOUTH INDIA

Sarah Jameson

Having tried for months to find time to write these notes, I was just about to start, when along came the August Newsletter for Birdwatchers containing Mr Ghorpade's Critique. This stopped me in my tracks! Would what I was about to write, qualify as being of 'sufficient scientific information'? Then came the September Newsletter with Dr Sálím

Ali' and Mr Gibson's views, with which I am in complete accord. I agree with Mr Ghorpade only up to a point. A certain amount of 'lengthy and somewhat flowery padding' is, I think, unavoidable, at any rate from the pens of amateurs like myself. My shattered confidence having been somewhat restored, I am once again sitting down to write this. I hope it does not contain too much 'redundant material' and 'padding' - and who knows, my observations may also contain a few grains of useful knowledge!

In all the years I have visited Coonoor, I have never heard any owl calls, till July 1972. In my excitement I regret I failed to note down the date, and even whether it was a dark or moonlit night. I traced the sound as coming from our small shola by the gate. This consists mainly of red gums and is in a very quiet area. There is one magnificent old red gum with a girth of 14 feet at ground level, and with the aid of a powerful torch and binoculars, I finally spotted the owl high up in this tree. It was too indistinct to see much except that it was a big bird. When I came in, I looked up the excellent table of Owl Calls in the Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan, Volume 3, and worked out that it could be none other than the Brown Wood Owl, Strix leptogramica indranee. This is the first time I have ever come across this owl.

The second time I heard it was in August on a moonlight night at about midnight on my return from dining out. I do not know how long it had been calling, but I tape recorded 18 calls before the bird was silent. The calls were coming from near the top of the same big tree. As I was standing at the foot of the tree, I was able to hear the initial tok, which, even at close range, is very faint, but it seemed to me, which later I confirmed by the tape, that not EVERY call is preceded by this tok. Perhaps it was not uttered each time, or perhaps some calls were so faint that they could neither be heard by me nor recorded though I have very acute hearing.

I again heard the owl calling in November, from the same big red gum, and then for the fourth and last time on January 1, 1973, at 9.30 p.m. It was very cold and eerie, and fortunately I did not then know that next morning I would see a Russell's Viper cross the drive, and go into a hole in a wall just near where I was standing! I recorded 23 consecutive calls. On playing back the tape, I timed the seconds between each call, and they vary from 12 to 15 seconds apart for the first recording in August, and from 9 to 14 seconds apart in the January recording, the majority of calls in the latter being 10 or 11 seconds apart. (The timing was from the first tok or tu to the first tok or tu of the second call etc.) In the majority of calls I can distinctly hear something like this: tok.. tu hoo hoo hoo, the first two hoos being very fast indeed, and the last hoo longer and slower. The calls which were not like this were tok.. tu hoo hoo. Salim Ali's description of the call is tok.. tu (with a

long accent over the u) hoo, which I take to mean that the tu is rather drawn out. I certainly heard no calls which were of only two syllables. Every single one I heard was of either 3 or 4 syllables. I was struck by the curiously penetrating quality of the calls. Admittedly the surrounding area is very quiet, but I heard it through several closed doors from the side of the house opposite to where it was calling in the shola, a distance of c. 80 yards. The breeding season is given as January to March, and only the last time I heard it was during that period, and then only just. Alas I have never heard it since. Although our compound adjoins forest land, and it is fairly well wooded round here, it could hardly be called heavily forested. I never managed to see the owl by daylight, and as far as I know, there was only the one bird here.

In the Birds of Southern India, by Baker and Inglis, 1930 edition, this owl is described as 'Strix indranee indranee. Male length 18.5 inches, female 19 inches. This owl is not uncommon in the Nilgiris and their slopes but is less common in the Wynad. Sometimes it is found in pairs, sometimes singly. It generally keeps to the sholas during the day, coming out at dusk; but I have flushed it from among rocks. It is very fond of perching on the roof of a house at night and hooting, remaining often for an hour or more... seems to see well during the day, and once disturbed is by no means easy of approach. It is not infrequently flushed when beating the sholas for game. Bourdillon obtained the eggs of this bird in Travancore in January and also took a single egg, probably a second laying, on the 1st March from the same place.

Whistler has very little to say about it. 'In Southern India and Ceylon another representative of this group (i.e. the Motled Wood Owl) is the Brown Wood Owl (Strix indranee) a very dark brown bird, also found sparingly in the Himalayas.'

In the Handbook it says, 'up to c. 1800 m altitude (Nilgiri and Palni Hills). 'This garden is about 6000 feet up.

'Birds particularly vocal during moonlight nights and in the breeding season. Also utters a variety of weird, eerie shrieks and chuckles, in addition to the loud bill-snapping. Was introduced in the Laccadives in the 1870's under a harebrained governmental plan for combating a plague of rats (Rattus rufescens). The grossly incompatible ecological conditions on these unforested coral islands, which the planners seem to have overlooked, soon brought an end to the birds but not to the rats! For an amusing account of this venture see Hume, S.F. 4: 433-4.'

I quote from Salim Ali's Birds of Kerala. 'Size: about that of the Pariah Kite. Singly or pairs, in well-wooded country.. presumably resident. Not common. Affects forested low country as well as hills. I have come across it only at Peermade (c. 3000 ft). Distribution outside Kerala: Southern India north to Mahableshwar on the west, Goomsur on the east. The Himalayas west to east are occupied by the race newarensis, while Ceylon has its endemic ochrogenys. A fourth race connec-

tens has recently (1950) been described from Bastar district, Madhya Pradesh.

It seems from Baker and Inglis account that the Brown Wood Owl was more common in these hills than it is now. I would be very interested to hear of other readers' experiences with this bird, particularly the calls. I never once heard the shrieks or chuckles or bill snapping.

A HIMALAYAN HABITAT

Ananta Mitra

Birdwatchers and naturalists move about in territories which are as enchanting as the fauna and flora they observe therein. In October last, my brother and I were returning from Jaldapara Rhino Sanctuary. We decided to pay a few hours' visit to the Mahanadi Sanctuary for watching birds.

Mahanadi is in the district of Darjeeling. It nestles in the foothills of the mighty Himalayas. The solitude of the sanctuary, with its cool climate, dense foliage and sparkling rivulets spelled an over-powering charm on ourselves. We started from Siliguri in the early morning on 28.x.1972. On our approach, we were greeted with a majestic view of the Kunchanjunga. The Forest Rest House was pleasing and hospitable. The Chowkidar deputed a peon, Nar Bahadur, to be our guide. Through solitary hilly pathways we started for a clearing created by the rivulet Panchanadi, running through the forests. The journey itself was like getting oneself lost in a fascinating world.

As we got near the clearing bird calls mounted in number, variety and intensity. To our bitterness we discovered that as newcomers to the Himalayan birds, most of the calls were unknown to us. On the basis of our anticipation and experience we could identify only a few of the species; others eluded our identification.

Following a beautiful song in the foliage, we discovered the Greyheaded Flycatcher. Though small in size it has a powerful sweet voice. Then we came across a drongo with a square tail, a Crested Yellow Bulbul, Chestnutheaded Bee-eater and a Pariah Kite. It was our first encounter with a Crested Yellow Bulbul. Its black crest was most distinctive.

Moving ahead we found a Common Iora and a Magpie Robin - the former whistling melodiously. The yellow colour of the ~~loras~~ ^{loras} seemed deeper in hue than the colour of their kindred in the plains.

On the stony bed of the rivulet we found a Whistling Thrush, White Wagtails and Grey Wagtails. On the branch of a nearby tree a Spotted Forktail was discovered. Along the edge of the rivulet, we found among the trees nuthatches, a Whitefronted Bulbul, and a Spider Hunter. From the calls coming from the dense forests we identified Lineated Barbets and Bluethroated

Barbets. Nar Bahadur stated that the local name of the Lineated Barbet is kutruka. In standardising Indian names of birds the expression may be considered. The name kutruka is a vocal rendition of its well-known calls kutroo ... kutroo ... kutroo. On our way back to the Rest House we were fascinated by a Scarlet Minivet. It was flitting in the foliage like a large crimson butterfly.

Two other things drew our attention: the first was the powerful calls of a species of monkey coming from inside the forests; the other was the continuous drone of innumerable crickets which were maintaining a background music in the lovely habitat. In the local vocabulary, the variety of crickets which drone during the day are called Jhankri and those who raise their rhythm in the night are called Chit-ra.

Our short stay was over. We left the lovely Sanctuary with a resolve to return here whenever possible.

GREY DRONGO (DICRURUS LEUCOPHAEUS) IN BOMBAY ON 14TH OCTOBER

J. S. Serrao

The Grey Drongo (Dicrurus leucophaeus) has arrived in Bombay this year comparatively earlier than what it usually does. The earliest record up to now was of a specimen collected in Bandra, Salsette, Bombay on 22.x.1928 by E. Henricks of the Bombay Natural History Society. The specimen was mistaken for a Black Drongo (Dicrurus adsimilis) while it was collected, but turned out to be the first record of the Grey Drongo for Bombay.

The earliest sighting of the bird I have is dated 27.x.1972 - an individual heard and seen at c. 12.30 noon in Dr Salim Ali's garden at Bandra. The day was exceptionally overcast and cold.

On 14th October 1973 Mr V. G. Govekar and I were birding in the Borivli National Park. Every now and again we were attracted to the commotion created by drongos in groups of 4-5 -- a couple in such a group chasing the rest from tree to tree to the accompaniment of aggressive calls. As their specific identity could not be established on the wing, we thought the groups were entirely of Black Drongos, settling some score among themselves. However, when the birds settled close to us we could identify the chased birds to be Grey Drongos. The resident Black Drongos were apparently resenting the encroachment of their territories by the migratory Grey Drongos and were pursuing them out.

Later during the day I saw two more Grey Drongos in Mr Zafar Futehally's garden at Andheri being harried by resident birds like the House Sparrows, Magpie Robins, and Redvented Bulbuls.

Master Ameet Zaveri reports having seen a Grey Drongo in Mahabaleshwar on 18th October.

Mahableshwar on 18th October 1973.

[21.x.1973 a Blyth's Reed Warbler (Acrocephalus dumetorum) was seen flitting among the branches of a drumstick tree (Moringa pterygosperma) in Juhu, Bombay. This seems to be an early arrival compared to the observations of Mr J. S. Serrao who recorded their arrival on 5th November for two consecutive years, 1971 and 1972, in Dr Salim Ali's garden at Pali Hill in Bandra. - Ed.]

R e v i e w

CHECKLIST OF THE BIRDS OF MAHARASHTRA with notes on their Status around Bombay, by Humayun Abdulali. pp. ii+16. Bombay Natural History Society, 1973. Price Rs2.50.

The Checklist of the Birds of Maharashtra, by Humayun Abdulali, recently published by the author for the Bombay Natural History Society, comes in as one more aid to the amateur birdwatcher as well as to the serious bird student in the State. In its sixteen pages are listed 522 species and forms of birds occurring in Maharashtra and their status is indicated by symbols placed against each form; those not met around Bombay and its environs are indicated by brackets and/or an asterisk placed around or against such forms. The Checklist should help the bird enthusiast what to look for in Maharashtra, and to pinpoint the identity of birds he has seen in the field.

The author modestly terms himself as 'compiler' of the Checklist, but a careful look at it shows that it is more than a compilation and that he has brought to bear on the work his experience gained through extensive collecting excursions throughout the State, as well as through his association with the bird specimens in the collection of the Bombay Natural History Society. An instance of the care exercised is seen in the exclusion of the Large Malabar Wood Shrike (Tephrodornis gularis sylvicola) and the Whitebellied Paradise Flycatcher (Terpsiphone paradisi leucogaster). Though the former was obtained at Waghai (Surat Dangs), c. 21°N., 73°30'E., where the foothills of the Sahyadris intermingle with those of the western Satpuras, there appear to be no specimens from the intervening country between Waghai and Londa in the Karnataka - Stuart Baker's inclusion of Bombay City in the bird's range (FBI 2: 311) being unsubstantiated. As far as the reviewer is aware, there are no specimens of the latter taken in the State though it is sight recorded from Matheran and Mahableshwar.

How useful a regional checklist can be is substantiated when one admits that it is not always possible to make immediate notes of every bird seen during a bird outing. Such sightings committed to memory are often lost; but a glance through a checklist helps to render one's list as complete as possible. To the

as possible. To the serious bird student the Checklist, together with the Catalogue of Bird specimens in the BNHS Collection which the author publishes in the Society's Journal from time to time and the Handbooks by Drs Salim Ali & S. Dillon Ripley will help in intelligently collecting over the State and thus enable to fill the gaps in our knowledge.

J. S. Serrao

/Readers interested in purchasing copies of the Checklist may contact J. S. Serrao. - Ed./

NOTES AND COMMENTS

In accepting the onerous responsibility of undertaking to edit and publish the Newsletter, I am fully aware of my shortcomings and it will be no easy matter to successfully continue the activities of such an efficient and experienced Editor as Mr Zafar Futehally.

However, as the Newsletter is mainly sustained by articles contributed through the energy and enthusiasm of its readers, I appeal to our readers to continue their efforts.

In this connection, readers may rest assured that all contributions are appreciated. At times some articles are not published for many months owing to limitations in the size of our modest publication, and the necessity to select each month a representative variety of matter. Therefore readers and contributors should not stop writing just because they feel that a particular observation is not worthy of publication. Perhaps even the mere sighting of a bird at a particular place on a particular date may establish some valuable record. Diffidence and shyness in the recording of observations is one of the stumbling blocks in the progress of an organization like ours.

CORRESPONDENCE

Is human disturbance an effective protection for communal roosts of birds?

K. K. Neelakantan's interesting observations on the roost of the Whiteheaded Myna (Sturnus malabaricus) have set me thinking again about a remark of Helen Spurway. She told me that both in Bhubaneswar and Hyderabad she has been struck with the fact that the birds seem to prefer the most lighted and noisiest places for their communal roost. When Anil Mahabal and I mapped the communal roosts of the Indian Myna (Acrideres tristis) in Poona, we also noticed that all the roosts were located on the periphery of the city, and always in spots

with good lighting and a fair amount of traffic around them. The birds spend the day feeding mostly in the fields surrounding the city, but come back to the city for the night. I have also seen the Indian Mynas roosting in the railway station at Viramgam; when I changed trains there one night at 1.00 a.m., it certainly did not appear like an ideal place for a quiet night's rest. All these observations suggest to me that the birds do find some sort of protection from nocturnal predators in such well-lit and disturbed spots, and act on the belief that a disturbed night's sleep is a better bargain than an eternal one.

Madhav Gadgil
Centre for Theoretical Studies
Indian Institute of Science
Bangalore 560 012

House Crow feeding a juvenile Jungle Crow

On 23rd June 1972 I witnessed an interesting phenomenon which I report here.

I was standing on a balcony on the fifth floor of Girnar Apartments, Pali Hill, Bandra, Bombay (I was visiting my relatives) idly watching a mixed group of about 20 or so House Crows and Jungle Crows hobnobbing on the terrace of a much lower building nearby. The smarter House Crows were seen to constantly harass their clumsier jungle relatives, some of which were still not of full adult status. As I watched them I saw a juvenile Jungle Crow approach an adult House Crow whose throat was gorged with food and beg in the characteristic fashion: crouched, shivering, with head thrown back and open gape all the while emitting soft caws. Naturally I expected the House Crow to ignore the young one and move away, but to my surprise it did not. On the other hand the House Crow inserted its beak into the Jungle Crow's open gape and disgorged some food. This occurred three times in succession and the House Crow then moved away apparently because its throat was empty.

Crows feeding the young of parasitic species which have hatched in their (the crow's) nests is well documented. However, the feeding of young of one species by an adult of a congeneric, but not conspecific, species especially in an open field situation surprised me. In a personal conversation Dr Salim Ali mentioned having encountered this phenomenon in some other birds. Is this phenomenon not uncommon in nature? Have any of our members observed similar instances?

S. R. Amladi
Bombay

Migrant birds in Bombay

On 17th October 1973 at 8.25 a.m. I saw the first Large Pied Wagtail on the terrace of my office at Worli, Bombay. Presumably it is the same bird which I saw last year. It is interesting to watch it walking along the terrace parapet looking for insects which I cannot see myself, and at times jump on the side of the parapet to catch the insects. Because of the slums in the area, the bird must be having plenty of insects to feed on.

The Common Swallows are yet to come, though last year I saw the first birds on 30th September; or I may be not so lucky to see them yet.

The Green Bee-eaters appear to be late this year.

B. A. Palkhiwalla

785-A, Dadar, Bombay

[The Common Swallows are in Bombay from the first week of October; the Green Bee-eaters were seen around Bombay in the last week of September. - Ed.]

S. V. Nilakanta

Editor, Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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NEWSLETTER FOR
BIRDPWATCHERS

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NESTING OF THE WHITEBREASTED WATERHEN

Zafar Futehally

In the Newsletter (Vol. 13(8): 10) for August, I reported that the watchman of our factory at Jogeshwari managed to locate a nest of the Whitebreasted Waterhen (*Amaurornis fuscus*). On 30th of July I went over to the Dynacraft factory at Jogeshwari and saw the nest well concealed inside a bougainvillea at a height of c. 5 feet from the ground. It contained four eggs and the bird flew away at our approach.

Subsequently the Watch and Ward staff of the factory kept these birds under observation and I was told that the eggs hatched on the 11th of August, and all the chicks left the nest the following day. For several days afterwards they were seen along the nullah that skirts the factory.

From what I could gather from the watchman's report it seems that all the chicks hatched the same day; presumably therefore incubation starts when all the eggs of the clutch are laid.

Incidentally the Dynacraft factory compound can become a good study ground of these waterhens, and some of our readers may like to do intensive observations during the next monsoon period.

I was unable to locate the nest in my own compound at Andheri, but kept fairly detailed notes between 4th July and 8th September on what I saw of the Waterhens. When the birds first arrived

they were shy, but as the days went by they became quite friendly and often came to within 15 feet of my desk in the study from where I could observe them clearly.

When I saw the pair together, I got the impression that the legs of one were more yellowish than those of the other, which were entirely blood red. Perhaps there is a slight difference in coloration between the male and the female.

The birds are extremely fond of water and had a bath in our lily pond at least four or five times a day. This was just for enjoyment, and the serious bathing from the point of view of hygiene was done in the little birdbath, a chinaware vessel 12 inch square and one inch deep placed beneath a Gardenia bush. I once saw the bird with wings outstretched, cormorant fashion, drying its feathers on the lawn. Every single day they spent a considerable time preening themselves to keep every barb and barbedule clean and properly aligned.

In spite of my engaging an urchin for two days to follow the birds in the garden and try and locate the nest we met with no success. Once I saw a bird fly into a Golden Shower creeper and immediately afterwards another bird emerged. I thought I had found the nest at last, but a thorough inspection of the site revealed nothing at all.

On the morning of 7th September I was aghast to see four chicks struggling and rolling helplessly on the ground with one adult in attendance. Apparently the adult was trying to induce the chicks to roll over into some sort of cover. This was at 7 in the morning when fortunately no crows were around. I picked up the lot and placed them below a Roselia shrub adjoining our lily pond. The next day, I saw one adult and one chick on the lawn in the afternoon and that was the last I saw of these birds this season. The multitude of crows, a pair of Crow-Pheasants, and a number of prowling cats, make life for Waterhens very difficult, and I would have been very surprised if any of the chicks had survived these hazards.

BIRDWATCHING IN THE TEHRI GARHWAL HILLS

Sohan Singh Saini •

The Tehri Garhwal Hills are quite well known to birdwatchers of India. Some of them have visited these areas physically, while others are familiar through various books and papers on birds in India.

This year I had a nice opportunity of visiting these hills during the second fortnight of May and the whole of June. This is perhaps the best season to see the beautiful birds in this area. It was not possible to keep an account of all the birds seen in this tract, but I have tried to make notes about the most commonly met birds and the most fascinating ones. Some of these notes are reproduced below:

Nakuri, elevation 3500 ft. The bird first encountered in the area was a Wedgetailed Green Pigeon (Treron sphenura). I was sitting in the rest house compound in the afternoon when a flock of 8 pigeons landed on a tree. Maroon on the middle, a yellow bar on the wings and red legs could help me in identifying it. As soon as these birds flew away I sighted a Blue-throated Barbet (Megalaima asiatica) through my binoculars sitting on a small dry tree far away. I went near the tree but the bird did not move. The beautiful plumage, especially the crimson head and sides of foreneck were really marvellous. I wanted to hear its call but the bird remained silent.

As the evening drew nearer, Whitebellied Drongos (Dicrurus caerulescens) appeared on the nearby trees in the fields. Soon after I could see a large number of swallows (Hirundo rustica) with chestnut forehead and throat, flying and diving in the river. The number of swallows increased gradually as it grew dark.

In the morning I saw some Slatyheaded Parakeets (Psittacula himalayana), a few Grey Tits (Parus major), Whitethroated Laughing Thrushes (Garrulax albobularis) and an Orangebellied Chloropsis (Chloropsis hardwickii).

Barkot, elev. 4500 ft. One day, in the forest, I saw an eagle settling down on a tree. It had a silvery white body below with brownish grey wings above. I identified this bird as Bonelli's Hawk-Eagle (Nisaetus fasciatus). After a few moments it flew away and settled on another tree. At this moment I saw the nest towards which it was approaching. This nest was made of dry twigs arranged on a platform formed by a whorl of branches originating from one point, about 25 metres above ground on a pine tree. With the help of the binoculars I could see the bird sitting in the nest, on the eggs of which I could see only two, but could not reach the nest physically.

Near my camp, there was a newly made but uninhabited building and every day I would see swallows (Hirundo rustica) coming near the building and vanishing. On investigation I found two earthen nests of these swallows and both had chicks inside. The same evening, I saw a very brilliantly plumaged bird near my tent. The ashy brown below and purplish blue above, having purple sides, lead me to believe that this bird was the small Niltava (Muscicapa macgrigoriae).

Redstarts (Chaimarrornis leucocephalus), leaping and wagging their tails while sitting on a rock were aplenty. Sometimes they would leap and run in a lovely gait.

Harsil, elev. 8500. The three most common and perhaps the most beautiful ones, I met here were again the Whitecapped Redstarts (Chaimarrornis leucocephalus), Hodgson's Pied Wagtail (Motacilla albaoides) and Himalayan Greenfinch (Hypocanthus spinoides). Throughout the day one could see these birds hopping around and calling in the pines and on the rocks. The Greenfinch was generally met in large flocks flying over and around the

It was a little smaller than a bulbul, with a light blue back, rusty brown breast and a large white patch below on the neck. Its red beak was about 2 inches long; tail was 4-5 inches long, blue and wedge-shaped and broader at the end. It gave a long intermittent whistle which was rather powerful compared to the size of the bird.

BIRDING IN THE REMOUNT DEPOT AREA, SAHARANPUR

Ashok Kumar Sharma

On Sunday, the 5th August, I started on my routine Sunday outing at 9 a.m. My destination was a beautiful artificial lake with natural panorama. I reached my destination by 9.30 a.m., and was very much delighted to see Spotbill Ducks swimming majestically in the lake, the red fleshy spots on their forehead distinctly visible against dark back-ground. I made a sketch of them while looking at them through my binoculars from a distance of about forty metres. Unfortunately it started to rain and I had to give up at 10.30 a.m.

I returned at 12 noon to find two more birds among the Spotbills. These were Nukhtas or Comb Ducks, one male and the other a female. They were in their breeding plumage. The male had a prominent black fleshy appendage on its beak. This appendage grows during the breeding season and falls off soon after breeding is over. This bird is a permanent resident in our country and lives in restricted areas. The female was considerably smaller than the male. The male swam undisturbed by my proximity, while the female was clearing looking disturbed, and swam around swiftly with its head bobbing back and forth.

On my way home I stopped at a place to have a look at a pair of Indian Stone Curlews, nesting in a Cherry field. Their nest comprised of 4-5 dried rootlets and 15-18 small pebbles lying scattered in the area, about 6-8 inches across. I noticed that their droppings were not to be seen anywhere near the nest. On looking around I discovered them at a distance of 6 m. from the nest. They seem to be very sensitive about sanitary conditions. The clutch comprised of two eggs with dark brown and light blotches all over, the size about that of a domestic hen's egg. This pair was evidently breeding second time in succession which was indicated by the presence of a juvenile, always sitting about 15 m away from the brooding parents. Its plumage was light in colour.

On my approaching the birds, they became wary but seemed reluctant to fly, and tried to conceal themselves behind some plants. All three birds stared at me continuously with their cold, large eyes. On getting nearer they took off one by one, emitting klee-klee calls and alighted about 100 m away.

After spending about half an hour there I continued on my

home. I had hardly gone 200 m when a Sirkeer Cuckoo flew across the road to perch on a tree. It flitted from branch to branch, and tree to tree. On a tree nearby I saw a juvenile Bonelli's Eagle with dark brown eyes. It was looking towards the ground and soon descended. Even after descending it kept on staring at something hidden in grass which was not visible to me. It walked some distance, all the time looking towards the ground. After thus walking for some distance it flew and perched on another tree on which its mate was already present. After some time both of them flew away.

With that ended my birdwatching for the day.

BIRDS INSIDE A STEEL PLANT

V. G. Kartha

A steel plant is perhaps the last place one would normally associate with birds. Some of us may not even expect to find any in such surroundings. The place is the very antithesis of what one usually assumes to be a bird's natural habitat. Yet, strangely enough, there is a fairly large amount of birdlife amidst the smoky chimneys and duty cavernous sheds where the heat becomes unbearable even on a mid winter day.

Sometime back the Editor had invited information on activities of birds in urban settings and un-natural surroundings. This led me last November to make a list of birds found within the perimeter of Bhilai Steel Plant. I had of course casually observed quite a few inside the area before, but now for the first time I set out on a tour of the whole establishment with the sole purpose of making an inventory. Needless to say I had 'protected' myself with an official excuse to go round lest my birdwatching meanderings inside potentially dangerous areas evoked frowns from the authorities. As it was, I was conscious of many curious stares at what must have looked like inexplicable behaviour on my part. I moved about at some personal risk craning my neck and peering up at the murkiness above. I did not take along my binoculars for fear of drawing the attention of some security guard to whom my explanations would have certainly sounded counterfeit.

In all, there were 17 different species within the exact boundaries of the steel plant, but none of them had so truly adapted itself to the steel making environment as had the Blue Rock Pigeon. It was the most predominant bird that caught the eye in all the unlikely places. In fact it was ubiquitous throughout the plant; there were virtually hundreds of them. They had settled down to a peaceful life amidst all that hustle and bustle, and heat and grime. They were to be found nesting high up among the overhead crane girders, between the lattices of roof trusses,

and underneath the eaves of tall coal and ore bunkers. They could be seen flying literally through the dense sulphurous fumes of the coke-ovens, apparently insensitive to the carbon monoxide and ammonia gases that hung over the area. The bunkers spewed out clouds of coal and ore dust, but the pigeons sat unmindful of it just a few feet from the thundering conveyor belts.

I went up one of the columns and peered down on a nest between two deep crane girders. There was a pigeon baby-sitting with two fluffy yellow chicks. The nest was a small shallow dish made of greasy cotton-waste and - of all things - metal lathe turnings! Only a little while earlier I had noticed two pigeons sitting on a nearby heap of muck and pecking at something. I couldn't believe they had found anything to eat in all that grease and metal scrap. Then one of them flew away with a chip in its beak. Was it really searching for steel building material?

I was puzzled for some time about the pigeons source of food as obviously it couldn't have been from within the plant precincts. I had never seen them in any food gathering activity. They were always lolling with puffed out necks or volplaning about or, as I said, infrequently pecking at muck heaps. Then the mystery was solved when I discovered large flights taking off from the plant in all directions early morning and returning back to it in similar groups in the evening.

The birds went foraging often 15-20 km out into the surrounding countryside. The steel plant was for them just a large dormitory! Radiating from it there seemed to be regular air corridors which were frequented by most of the flights. On one occasion, with heavy clouds providing a low ceiling, and a strong headwind, the birds were forced down to almost bush top level skimming their way homeward without any appreciable decrease in speed. From where I watched, they had yet another 5 km to go to the safety for their steely roosts and darkness was but a few minutes away. They wouldn't have lost their way of course, as their dormitory was the biggest and unmistakable landmark for many a mile around.

After the Blue Rock Pigeon, the most abundant birds noticed within the plant area were the Common Myna and the House Sparrow. But unlike the pigeons they preferred more open and quieter places farther off from the din and dust. The huge overhead gas pipe-lines and their supporting structures provided good nesting places: the mynas building on the trestles and walkways and the sparrows occupying the fissures and crevices on the concrete columns. The sparrows appeared to be smaller and darker than their relations outside.

The perimeter of the steel plant encloses a large area not all of which is taken by mills and furnaces. A lot of space is reserved for the open storage of the myriad items required

for maintaining the plant. Here the ground is dry and stony with occasional bushes and grassy plots. The usual types of birds associated with such topography could be seen here: Indian Robin, Rufoustailed Lark, Common Green Bee-eater, Roller and Little Brown Dove. Along the narrow pathways in between massive tarpaulin-covered machine parts, I came across the seasonal migrants - the Grey-, White- and Pied Wagtails.

Down beside the cooling water channels adjacent to the gigantic blast furnaces, couple of Paddy Birds had unobtrusively taken up their motionless vigil at the water's edge, while Common- and Wire-tailed Swallows flitted along the surface up and down the length of the canal. Far above, topping the column of smoke rising from the 100 metre tall chimneys of the steel melting shop, I could barely make out the soarers putting to full use the 'government-provided' thermals: a few Neophrons and half a dozen Whitebacked vultures. There were also the Pariah Kites and Tawny Eagles working their beats down the slope of one large roof and up the slope another, now and then swooping down to grab the left-over lunch thrown away by a worker, or some other morsel. Once in a while a commotion among the pigeon-cotes and sparrow-roosts drew my attention to the sudden appearance of their arch-villain - the Sparrow Hawk.

Bordering the coke ovens and blast furnaces, are two large man-made lakes each about 1.5 km in diameter. Though these are strictly speaking not within the boundary wall of the plant, they are actually considered part of the works, storing the water required for it. In winter these lakes are the resting place of a vast congregation of waterbirds. A rough estimate of mine for the past 3-4 years puts the total number, in the height of the season, around 300 in both the tanks together. They seem to be increasing every year as they are left completely undisturbed and unmolested, shooting, boating or fishing being prohibited here.

F. M. Gauntlett describes a similar scene of a waterbird habitat against the backdrop of the Durgapur Steel Plant J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc. 68(3): 6197. But there the birds are in a much more congenial setting, and farther away from polluted environments, than the ducks in Bhilai.

I have so far identified the following species in the tanks; it is quite possible that a few more may be present: Coot, Pochard, Shoveller, Garganey, Common Teal, Green- and Red Shanks, Redheaded and Tufted Pochards, Spotbill, Pintail, Green- and Common Sandpipers, Little Stint and Little Pratincole, Little- and Large Cormorants, Black and Brownheaded Gulls. Birds identified beyond the immediate vicinity of the water have not been included here as they wouldn't, in all truth, justify the title of this article.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Astronavigation

The attention of Birdwatchers is invited to the article 'The Bird that lost its way' in the November issue of Readers' Digest. The article explains how the bird in this instance a Manx Shearwater, is able to navigate the oceans by its memory of the position of stars. Not only is the bird capable of fixing its position by its observation of stars, but it must discriminate between stars and planets and ignore such celestial bodies as the new comet, presently sighted, to avoid getting confused.

Such a faculty can probably be developed by us by spending nights and days, under open skies, like sailors in primitive boats. Literacy and intelligence are not necessary.

Locust menace

All India Radio has issued a warning about the approaching locust menace. This will be in the areas adjoining the arid regions of India and Pakistan.

We were all along under the blissful impression that our abundant birdlife kept a control over the periodic population explosion of locusts. It now appears that we have probably killed off the birds that used to feed on locusts and are now creating further conditions of man-made famines.

All the foreign exchange that these poor countries earn, by way of allowing various Sheiks to help themselves to our Houbo-ras and Bustards, will never compensate for a single day's destruction by locusts.

Request to readers

Readers are requested to contribute short notes. These are much appreciated and make our Newsletter more lively. Also readers are requested to endorse, contradict and comment on the views and observations in the articles appearing in the Newsletter. The aim is to take more interest in each others and bring members closer through lively discussions.

CORRESPONDENCE

Adult birds' concern for young of other birds

In regard to Dr S. R. Amladi's observation of a House Crow adult feeding a young one of a Jungle Crow, it is difficult to tell apart in the field a young Jungle Crow from a young House Crow unless they are accompanied by their respective parents. This difficulty is enhanced when they are in a mixed lot as observed by Dr Amladi. This is because the young House

Grow lacks the grey collar of its parents, and has to be told apart from its parents.

I do not understand the point Dr Amladi makes in regard to such feeding by congeneric and conspecific individuals. Seemingly adult birds while engaged in such feeding neither restrict themselves to congeneric or conspecific young, nor to parasitic chicks hatched in their own nest. Such feeding appears to be merely a response of an adult to the submissive attitude taken by a young bird while begging food, conditioned perhaps by nature's proviso that the solicitor is not predaceous to the feeder and vice versa. Thus we have the example of a Common Myna (Acridotheres tristis) feeding a young Pied Myna (Sturnus contra) /C. M. Inglis, J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc. 19: 985/ An unpublished incident I recall is one reported by a British Army Officer to Mr Humayun Abdulali in early 1940s, when I was a stenographer with his firm, Messrs Faiz & Co. It concerned a Common Myna flying with food in its beak for its callow young in a nest-hole. At the sight of a young fledged cuckoo begging food on the ground the myna alighted and fed the waif with food meant for its own young. This incident I cite with Mr Humayun Abdulali's permission.

J. S. Serrao

Paradise Flycatcher in the Malabar Hill area, Bombay

On the evening of the 30th October, we were looking out from the balcony of a block of flats off Altamont Road when we saw something streak past over the parked cars and come to rest in a tree. It was a Paradise Flycatcher, a glistening black and white, with rather short streamers - almost half the length one would expect. Ironically we had just been away for a week end in a bird-rich area across the harbour, but we had to return to noisy cracker-mad Bombay to see this beautiful creature. It then flew away into the greenery of the next door garden - one of the last in this city.

In a recent issue of the Newsletter a correspondent had asked for information about the presence of the Whitebrowed Bulbul in Bombay. Why not initiate a similar enquiry into the presence of the Paradise Flycatcher during its migratory spell in the city? I have never spotted one here before. Only once about 12 years ago did I see a young chestnut coloured bird in a garden on Malabar Hill.

Shirin Sabavala

51 Meher Apts, Anstey Road

[It is a regular visitor to Bombay area from about mid October to about end April - the last date we have is 27th April. It frequents shady groves and gardens and in spite of its striking colours the adult male is remarkably inconspicuous when sitting motionless. - Ed.]

S. V. Nilakanta

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